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# Student Athletes' Appraisals of the NCAA Amateurism Policies Governing College Sports

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# Student Athletes' Appraisals of the NCAA Amateurism Policies Governing College Sports

## **Abstract**

The amateurism principle governing college sports prohibits student-athletes from receiving compensation beyond tuition, room, and board, despite them garnering publicity, bolstering school pride, providing entertainment, and generating billions of dollars in revenue for the Division I institutions they attend (Sylwester & Witosky, 2004). Purportedly a measure to protect players from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises (NCAA, 2013a), the legitimacy of this claim has been called into question in recent years, as former college athletes have gone public about their basic needs not being met. From hungry nights with no food and inadequate insurance for sport-related injuries to comparatively lower graduation rates and “full” athletic scholarships that do not cover the cost of attending college, the concerns of college athletes have been captured in the press and media. Despite this, their voices have gone practically unheard in the published higher education research on student-athletes (Van Rhee, 2012).

This dissertation employed qualitative research methods to examine student-athletes' appraisals of NCAA amateurism policies. Specifically, this phenomenological study used individual and group interviews with 40 college football players at 28 institutions across each of the power five conferences (PFCs) to answer the primary research question: How do student-athletes on revenue-generating athletic teams (hereinafter referred to as revenue-generating athletes) experience college and the amateurism policies governing college sports? Other research questions guiding this study include: (1) What do revenue-generating athletes perceive to be the costs and benefits of having participated in intercollegiate athletics? (2) How do revenue-generating athletes juxtapose the NCAA's amateurism rhetoric with their own educational and professional expectations and experiences? (3) What are revenue-generating athletes' appraisals of amateurism policies governing college sports? Criterion sampling methods were used in this study. The sample comprised of seniors on football teams in one of the power five conferences—The Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), the Big Ten Conference (B1G), the Big 12 Conference (Big 12), the Pacific-12 Conference (Pac-12), and the Southeastern Conference (SEC). Findings juxtaposed amateurism and other NCAA policy rhetoric with participants' educational and professional expectations and experiences.

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STUDENT ATHLETES' APPRAISALS OF THE NCAA AMATEURISM POLICIES  
GOVERNING COLLEGE SPORTS

Collin Devon Williams, Jr.

A DISSERTATION

in

Education

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in

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Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2015

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STUDENT ATHLETES' APPRAISALS OF THE NCAA AMATEURISM POLICIES  
GOVERNING COLLEGE SPORTS

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**DEDICATION**

To

God

Family

Friends

Fraternity

Prep for Prep

Collegiate

Penn

Liberta

Brooklyn

Corona

Thank you for being my village. Thank you for believing. Thank you for inspiring.

To you, this work is dedicated.

**ABSTRACT****STUDENT ATHLETES' APPRAISALS OF THE NCAA AMATEURISM POLICIES  
GOVERNING COLLEGE SPORTS**

Collin Devon Williams, Jr.

Shaun R. Harper

The amateurism principle governing college sports prohibits student-athletes from receiving compensation beyond tuition, room, and board, despite them garnering publicity, bolstering school pride, providing entertainment, and generating billions of dollars in revenue for the Division I institutions they attend (Sylwester & Witosky, 2004). Purportedly a measure to protect players from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises (NCAA, 2013a), the legitimacy of this claim has been called into question in recent years, as former college athletes have gone public about their basic needs not being met. From hungry nights with no food and inadequate insurance for sport-related injuries to comparatively lower graduation rates and “full” athletic scholarships that do not cover the cost of attending college, the concerns of college athletes have been captured in the press and media. Despite this, their voices have gone practically unheard in the published higher education research on student-athletes (Van Rhee, 2012).

This dissertation employed qualitative research methods to examine student-athletes' appraisals of NCAA amateurism policies. Specifically, this phenomenological study used individual and group interviews with 40 college football players at 28 institutions across each of the power five conferences (PFCs) to answer the primary research question: How do student-athletes on revenue-generating athletic teams

(hereinafter referred to as revenue-generating athletes) experience college and the amateurism policies governing college sports? Other research questions guiding this study include: (1) What do revenue-generating athletes perceive to be the costs and benefits of having participated in intercollegiate athletics? (2) How do revenue-generating athletes juxtapose the NCAA's amateurism rhetoric with their own educational and professional expectations and experiences? (3) What are revenue-generating athletes' appraisals of amateurism policies governing college sports? Criterion sampling methods were used in this study. The sample comprised of seniors on football teams in one of the power five conferences—The Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), the Big Ten Conference (B1G), the Big 12 Conference (Big 12), the Pacific-12 Conference (Pac-12), and the Southeastern Conference (SEC). Findings juxtaposed amateurism and other NCAA policy rhetoric with participants' educational and professional expectations and experiences.



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## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Enormous price tags on television rights packages, athletic department spending, and coaching salaries evidence how lucrative the enterprise of intercollegiate athletic has become (Clotfelter, 2011). In 2008, for example, ESPN contracted to pay the NCAA \$500 million dollars to broadcast four of the five major Bowl Championship Series (BCS) games (Wilbon, 2011). The BCS website states, “Each conference whose team qualifies automatically for the BCS receives approximately \$22 million in net revenue. A second team qualifying brings an additional \$6 million to its conference.” By 2011, four individual conferences—the Big 12, Pac 12, SEC and ACC—had all signed football TV deals valued at over a billion dollars each (Thamel, 2011). The most prolific of the television deals came in 2010 when the NCAA entered into a 14-year, \$10.8 billion dollar agreement with Turner/CBS sports to broadcast the DI Men’s Basketball Championship (Sandomir & Thamel, 2010). In a study of athletic spending at the institutional level, Berkowitz & Upton (2011b) found 228 athletic departments had spent a total of \$6.8 billion in 2010. That year, the University of Alabama’s athletic department alone brought in \$26.6 million in revenue.

Coaches too have seen much of this profit. Eclipsing the \$3.5 million Jim Tressel made in 2011, are other high profile basketball and football coaches like Rick Pitino and Nick Saban, who in the same year, brought in \$7.5, \$5.9, and \$3.8 million in salaries, respectively (Berkowitz & Upton, 2011a; Wilbon, 2011). In the same year, the coaches of approximately half of the 68 teams that made the 2011 NCAA Men’s Basketball tournament and 58 of the 120 FBS football school earned salaries greater than \$1 million

dollars (O'Neil, 2011). On their most recent financial statements, the NCAA reported total revenue of nearly \$1 billion (\$989 million) in 2014; for the fourth year in a row, the Association made a surplus of over \$60 million (Berkowitz, 2015). While student-athletes on DI men's basketball and football teams generate the majority of this revenue, the NCAA's amateurism principle prohibits them from being compensated beyond tuition, room, and board (Sylwester & Witosky, 2004). Still, there exist noncommercial benefits of participating in college athletics.

As a part of its Behind the Blue Disk series, a collection of questions and answers (Q&As) explaining their position on issues in college sport, the NCAA released a one page document called Student-Athlete Benefits that details both the immediate and lifelong benefits of participating in intercollegiate athletics (NCAA, n.d.). Student-athletes are afforded additional pathways to a college education through athletic scholarships; receive academic support and tutoring services; graduate at rates higher than their non-sport peers; have access to elite training opportunities, a healthy diet, and \$70 million in emergency resources through the NCAA's Student Assistance Fund; are provided medical insurance through their schools; gain exposure and have new experiences as they travel for competition; and are prepared for life after college having learned transferable skills such as time management, leadership, and teamwork.

Institutions use rhetoric, broadly defined as the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, to communicate messages about themselves to others. In higher education, literature on mission statements and institutional rhetoric is ubiquitous as their presence alone begs the very legitimacy of a college, university, or governing body, such as the NCAA; however, researchers have not reached a consensus about their utility

(Morpheus & Hartley, 2006). While some argue a shared purpose provides an organizational roadmap to success and achieving espoused goals, others are more skeptical, viewing them as “excessively vague” and “unrealistically aspirational” “rhetorical pyrotechnics” (p. 456-457). Of the little empirical analysis that has been conducted, most suggests the harsher critiques are accurate: mission statements and institutional rhetoric are not consistent with the institution’s current identity. Table 1 presents the amateurism policies using the same rhetoric from the *2014-2015 NCAA Manual* (henceforth the *Manual*).

<b>Table 1. Amateurism and other NCAA Policies</b>	
<b>Fundamental Policy, Article 1.3</b>	A basic purpose of the Association is to maintain intercollegiate athletics as an integral part of the educational program and the athlete as an integral part of the student body and, by so doing, retain a clear line of demarcation between intercollegiate athletics and professional sports. (NCAA, 2014, p.1)
<b>Principle of Amateurism, Bylaw 2.9</b>	Student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport, and their participation should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental and social benefits to be derived. Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation, and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises.
<b>Principle of Amateurism, Bylaw 2.9</b>	Amateur competition is a bedrock principle of college athletics and the NCAA. Maintaining amateurism is crucial to preserving an academic environment in which acquiring a quality education is the first priority. In the collegiate model of sports, the young men and women competing on the field or court are students first and athletes second.
<b>Maximum Financial Aid to Individual, Bylaw 15.1.6</b>	An institution shall not award financial aid to a student-athlete that exceeds the cost of attendance that normally is incurred by students enrolled in a comparable program at that institution.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem that this study focuses on is the insistence of the NCAA to operate under the guise of an amateur enterprise, despite the commercialization of big-time

college sport and the professionalization of its participants. Though the student-athlete and amateur ideals espouse goals of prioritizing academic success over athletic achievement, the enterprise of intercollegiate athletics has evolved into a mainstream entertainment business where participants compete for revenue and exposure at least as much as they do for victories (Duderstadt, 2009). Growing financial pressures have led to negative perceptions of sports programs, as they have undermined academic integrity, incentivized ethical compromises, and proliferated the incidence of sport scandals (Harper & Donnor, 2015). According to former NCAA Executive Director Dick Schultz, the average person would say four things about college athletics: “colleges make millions of dollars at the expense of the college athlete; all coaches cheat; athletes never graduate; and all athletes are drug addicts” (Telander, 1989, p. 24). In the last decade, more than half the institutions playing at the most competitive level, Division I-A, have been sanctioned for violating NCAA regulations (Duderstadt, 2009).

Over the last century, four national reports—the 1929 Carnegie Foundation study, the 1952 Presidents’ Report for the American Council on Education, the 1974 study for the American Council on Education conducted by George Hanford, and the 1991 Knight Foundation Commission study—have provided systematic analyses of the influence of intercollegiate athletics on the postsecondary educational environment, suggesting that problems associated with big-time athletics cannot be easily corrected (Clotfelter, 2011). In the first study, the Carnegie foundation spent three years visiting over 100 colleges and universities to assess administrative control of athletics inside the university, the consequences of participation, the status of college coaches, recruiting, press coverage of college sports, and players’ amateur status (Thelin, 2011). Observing a “distorted scheme

of values,” from abuses in recruiting to slush funds, player subsidies, and coaching salaries, Savage et al. (1929, pp. 306-307) blamed “commercialism, and a negligent attitude toward the educational opportunities for which the college exists.” Clotfelter (2011) asserts remarkably little has changed in over 60 years: subsequent reports continue to indict the commercialization of college sports, its push for revenue, the involvement of media, and the influence of boosters outside the university for the corruption of the student-athlete ideal, as evidenced by the excesses of recruitment, athletic scholarships, and special privileges. By the 1990s, competitive college sports “had all the trappings of a major entertainment enterprise” (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 1999, p. 5) and were “in direct conflict with nearly every value that should matter for higher education” (p. 21).

Rather than achieving systematic reform, the NCAA has instead developed a complex code of conduct that for the most part, ignores the student in the student-athlete and primarily focuses on the athlete (Duderstadt, 2009). For example, an analysis of DI men’s basketball coaching contracts indicated that coaches were five times more likely to have incentivized compensation opportunities for athletic success than they were for academic success (Wilson, Schrager, Burke, Hawking, and Gauntt, 2011). As Hanford (1978) argues, we are amidst “an educational dilemma concerning the place and mission of athletics within our intellectual estates by mixing dollar values with educational ones” (p. 232). Relatedly, the Association focuses more on amateurism infractions than inferior education matters (Purdy, Eitzen & Hufnagel, 1985). Cullen, Latessa, & Jonson’s (2012) assessment of the extent and sources of NCAA rule infractions reveals that aside from practicing beyond the mandated limits, the majority of violations are related to the



compensation of athletes. While the large payments that garner the most media attention are relatively rare, student-athletes receiving free meals and other services (e.g. haircuts and dry cleaning) from coaches, boosters, and local businesses occurred much more frequently. Seemingly, the NCAA's determination to not pay its amateur athletes is the main source of trouble in college sports (Clotfelter, 2011). As the maze of regulations overlook educational goals, the reform agenda has failed to mitigate the commercial pressures that create the tenuous relationship between athletics and academics (Duderstadt, 2009).

In *The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values*, Shulman and Bowen (2001) analyzed 40 years (1951-1990) of data from 30 highly selective postsecondary institutions with rigid admissions policies. The findings, referred to as "hidden costs" of college intercollegiate athletic, are more troubling as the pervasiveness of athletic pressures undermined the values of the most academically rigorous institutions. Even these schools were complicit in the underperformance and lower graduation rates of student-athletes, who were shown preferential treatment in admissions' processes, recruited academically underprepared, clustered into certain majors, and funneled into disengaged athletic subcultures isolated from campus culture, Shulman and Bowen found. Bowen and Levin (2003) more closely examined the collegiate experiences of recruited athletes, walk-on athletes, and nonathletes in *Reclaiming the Game: College Sports and Educational Values*. At the 33 non-athletic scholarships offering schools, recruited athletes were as much as four times more likely to gain admission than a nonathlete applicant with similar academic credentials; considerably more likely than walk-on athletes and nonathletes to end up in the bottom

third of their class; performing even worse than their GPAs and standardized test score predicted. Thus, some scholars have ultimately concluded that in universities with major sports programs the corruption of academic ideals is endemic (Clotfelter, 2011).

While commercialism's evils have been the subject of much literature, authors have largely treated it as an abstract force from which intercollegiate sport stakeholders have refuge. "There remains a considerable gap in the historical record when it comes to the evolution of 'NCAA-sponsored' professionalism in the form of athletically related financial aid" purport Sack and Staurowsky (1992) because "almost no attention has been given to the process by which the NCAA itself has incorporated professionalism into its constitution and bylaws" (p. 8). In *College Athletes for Hire: The Evolution and Legacy of the NCAA Amateur Myth* (1999), they explain how amateurism rhetoric obscures NCAA-sanctioned payments, downplays the institution's role in professionalizing college sport, and sways the public into perceiving the Association as a defender of this erroneous ideal. Thus, "NCAA-fabricated mythology" not only exploits athletes financially, but also undermines educational integrity (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998).

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of the current study is to describe and understand how student-athletes experience college and the amateurism policies governing intercollegiate athletics. By juxtaposing the NCAA's principles and espoused goals with their academic and professional expectations and outcomes, this study seeks to examine their perceptions of the costs and benefits of participating in big-time college sport as well as better align amateurism rhetoric with their lived realities. In many ways, this study is a response to the proliferation of former athletes' varying critiques of the NCAA and its member

institutions. As players no longer apprehensive about their athletic eligibility typically offer these reports in television interviews, documentaries, and an increasing number of lawsuits, this study aims to supplement those perspectives with data collected through individual and group interviews. Particular emphasis is placed on the experiences and perceptions of undergraduate men on DI men's athletic teams in the power five conferences (PFC), as they are responsible for the majority of the revenue generated by college sports.

### Guiding Questions

The primary research question is: How do student-athletes on revenue-generating athletic teams (hereinafter referred to as revenue-generating athletes) experience college and the amateurism policies governing college sports? Other research questions guiding this study include: (1) What do revenue-generating athletes perceive to be the costs and benefits of having participated in intercollegiate athletics? (2) How do revenue-generating athletes juxtapose the NCAA's amateurism rhetoric with their own educational and professional expectations and experiences? (3) What are revenue-generating athletes' appraisals of amateurism policies governing college sports?

### **Significance of Study**

Though it explores the social construction of their athletic identities, their lived experiences with stereotyping and low expectations, and bachelor's degree completion (Harper, 2009), the existing literature on DI male student-athletes has not been able to clearly delineate the multiple characteristics and cumulative processes—sport commitment, educational expectations, campus climate issues, and academic engagement practices—that influence academic success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Subsequently,

the support services and programs for student-athletes have failed to consistently and effectively enhance student-athletes' learning and personal development and raise graduation rates (Comeaux, 2007; Hinkle, 1994). "These analytical gaps constrain the ability of student affairs leaders, particularly academic advisors and counselors, to explain, not simply to describe, how certain factors influence student-athletes' academic success" (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011, pg. 235).

Major consequences of the failure to distinguish between the multiple influences on academic success are the deficit orientation assumptions made about college athletes (Comeaux, 2007; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). They are too often treated like "passive victims of systemic exploitation" in the abundant editorials and exposes and scant scholarly research that fail to enlist their voices and perspectives (Van Rheenen, 2012, pg. 11). The one large-scale survey (Van Rheenen, 2011) and the two single-institution qualitative studies (Adler & Adler 1991; Beamon 2008) that have circumvented this misstep raise more questions than they answer. While they suggest a majority of revenue-generating athletes do feel exploited, we remain largely unaware of what leads to these perceptions. Accordingly, Van Rheenen (2012) calls for more a comprehensive understanding of the perceived exploitation of college athletes.

The present study aims to fill these gaps in research on college athletes by: truly listening to their voices (Beamon & Bell, 2011), investigating their experiences and perspectives to redesign educational practice (Benson, 2000); putting their needs at the center, considering all aspects of the student and his development (Person & LeNoir, 1997); and using data across multiple institutions and athletic conferences (Gaston-Gayles, 2009).

The significance of this study extends beyond closing gaps in the college sport knowledge base. As current and former athletes college athletes are rallying together to gain a “seat at the table” and “voice their needs” to the NCAA and its member institutions, this study will be important to mitigating concerns on both sides. The research questions guiding this inquiry emerged from this ongoing debate. The findings, to some extent, are intended to facilitate this discourse. Participants’ feedback is needed to move forward in ways that are seen as equitable for each of the stakeholders. Ideally, this contribution will help meet the needs of revenue-generating athletes and prevent the dissolution of competitive athletics within the NCAA.

### **Key Concepts and Definitions**

Included in this section are definitions of key concepts used throughout this dissertation.

Amateurism	The Principle of Amateurism, or Bylaw 2.9, states: “Student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport, and their participation should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental and social benefits to be derived. Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation, and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises” (NCAA, 2013, p. 4). An institution cannot “award financial aid to a student-athlete that exceeds the cost of attendance that normally is incurred by students enrolled in a comparable program at the institution” and “is an amount calculated by an institutional financial aid office...” (NCAA, 2013, p. 192).
Division I (DI)	Also known as <i>high profile, revenue generating</i> and <i>big-time</i> , DI is the most lucrative, popular and competitive level within intercollegiate athletics.
Student-Athlete	NCAA terminology for a participant in intercollegiate athletics
Revenue Athlete	Student-athletes on teams that generate revenue, specifically DI men’s basketball and football

Scholarship Athlete	Student-athletes for whom the cost of tuition, room, and board are covered for their participation in intercollegiate athletics
Walk-On Athlete	Student-athletes who are not recruited to play sports, but earn spots on athletic teams after being admitted to an institution
FBS	The top level of college football is the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), formerly Division I-A. In total, the FBS is comprised of 10 conferences and 128 member institutions.
Power 5 Conference (PFC)	The five standout conferences within the FBS, referred to as the “Big Five” or the “Power Five”—The Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), the Big Ten Conference (B1G), the Big 12 Conference (Big 12), the Pacific-12 Conference (Pac-12), and the Southeastern Conference (SEC).
ACC	The ACC is comprised of 15 schools—Boston College, Clemson University, Duke University, Florida State University, Georgia Tech University, University of Louisville, University of Miami, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, North Carolina State University, University of Notre Dame, University of Pittsburgh, Syracuse University, University of Virginia, Virginia Tech University and Wake Forest University.
B1G	The B1G is comprised of 14 schools—University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, Indiana University, University of Iowa, University of Maryland-College Park, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, Michigan State University, University of Minnesota, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Northwestern University, Ohio State University, Pennsylvania State University, Purdue University, Rutgers University, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
Big 12	The Big 12 is comprised of 10 schools—Baylor University, Iowa State University, University of Kansas, Kansas State University, University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma State University, University of Texas-Austin, Texas Christian University, Texas Tech University, and West Virginia University.
PAC 12	The Pac-12 is comprised of 12 schools—University of Arizona, Arizona State University, University of California-Berkeley, University of California-Los Angeles, University of Colorado-Boulder, University of Oregon, Oregon State University, University of Southern California, Stanford University, University of Utah, University of Washington, and Washington State University.

## SEC

The SEC is comprised of 14 schools— University of Alabama, University of Arkansas, Auburn University, University of Florida, University of Georgia, University of Kentucky, Louisiana State University, University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, University of Missouri, University of South Carolina, University of Tennessee, Texas A&M University, and Vanderbilt University. As of February 2015, there are a total of 65 colleges and universities in the five power conferences.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

#### **Chapter Overview**

A thorough examination of the exploitation of student-athletes must acknowledge the historic and contemporary roles of sports in the U.S. context, the postsecondary environment, and the lives of undergraduate men on revenue-generating basketball and football teams at Division I institutions. Hence, this review of literature begins with a sociological exploration of sports to describe why they are so valued and popular in American society as well as how our youth, particularly boys, are socialized into, participate in, and benefit from them. It then traces the history of intercollegiate athletics, paying particular attention to the NCAA's history, evolution, and critiques. The final section describes the how participation in Division I intercollegiate athletics influences students' academic outcomes.

#### **Sociology of Sport in the United States**

Sociology affords researchers a lens through which to examine sports as social phenomena (Giulianotti, 2005). Beyond the underlying assumption that sports are about more than the games and competitions themselves, sociologists posit that they are integral parts of our social and cultural contexts and thus, can be used to study the social worlds we collectively create, organize, maintain, and change (Henricks, 2006).

Sociology of sport research is generally used to develop our knowledge base on the cultures and societies in which sport exist, the social worlds created around sports, and the experience of individuals and groups associated with sports. Sports are worthy sites of scholarly investigation because they are socially significant activities; reinforce raced,



gendered and classed ideology; and have become integrated into important spheres of American life, from family, economy, and the media to politics, education, and religion (Coakley, 2014). Because they provide excitement, memorable experiences, and opportunities to initiate and extend social relationships for many people, sports are considered socially significant (Coakley, 2009).

Defining ideology as “webs of ideas and beliefs that people use to give meaning to the world and make sense of their experiences,” sports influence how we think about race, class, and gender (Coakley, 2014, p. 27). As women are generally perceived to be inferior to men in activities requiring strength, emotional control, and physicality, the dominant gender ideology is that sports are to be played by boys and men; they are inherently better at them and participating in them enhances their masculinity (Greendorfer, 1993). For example, while playing a contact sport like tackle football is believed to make a boy a man, throwing a football “like a girl” renders him a feminine underperformer (Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992). The dominant racial ideology assumes that skin color is predictive of specific predispositions to athletic ability. Widely held beliefs include darker skinned and Black men’s ability to run especially fast and jump incredibly high, whereas lighter skinned persons and White men are thought to be less athletically gifted (Coakley, 2009). The dominant class ideology is that sports are a microcosm of a meritocratic and capitalistic system that is fair and just. As meritocracy falsely assumes that equal opportunities for economic success exist for those who deserve them, sports indirectly legitimize this belief as they reinforce the notion that those who work hardest win (Birrell & McDonald, 2000).

Sports are also connected to life in the United States, from family, the economy, and the media to politics, religion, and education (Coakley & Dunning, 2000). In millions of American families, sports influence the children participating as much it does the parents who provide transportation, watch games and coach teams (Mandelbaum, 2004). Sports stimulate local and regional economies with the billions of dollars spent each year on tickets, equipment, participation fees and dues, and gambling (Horne, 2006). While the rights to broadcast sports cost media outlets billions of dollars a year, their coverage of them influences conversations and reinforces the aforementioned ideological themes (Dyck, 2000). Politically, sports serve many national purposes like engendering pride, unity, and identity, expanding global recognition, and displaying power, wealth, and physical prowess (Majumdar & Hong, 2006). Further, the management of sport is political as it involves organizations that make decisions about rules, eligibility, and the allocation of rewards and punishments (Malcolm, 2008). Tasked with exercising power over people's lives, these groups are often referred to as "governing" bodies. Even religious institutions in America, like churches that revise their worship schedules so members can watch the Super Bowl on Sundays, accommodate sports (Yiannakis & Melnick, 2001). Across all education levels, sports are typically a part of the general physical education curriculum; however, they become more serious, competitive, and popular in high school and college (Zirin, 2007).

#### Youth Socialization and Participation in Organized Competitive Sports

An interactive and continuous process of learning and social development, socialization occurs as we become familiar with ourselves and with the social worlds in which we live (Coakley, 2009). Research on sports and socialization is typically

qualitative; uses in-depth interviews and field observations; and studies small samples (Gayles, 2009). It seeks to procure detailed descriptions of the complexity of three processes: becoming and staying involved in sports, changing or ending participation in sports, and the impact of being involved in sports (Coakley, 2014).

Methodologically sound research has identified three major factors related to sport participation: (1) a person's abilities, characteristics, and resources; (2) the influence of significant others; and (3) the availability of meaningful sport opportunities (McCormack & Chalip, 1988). To better understand the process of being introduced and becoming committed to sports, Stevenson (1999) interviewed 29 athletes. Consistent across participants' descriptions of how they became elite are two processes, *introduction and involvement* and *developing a commitment* to sport participation. While important people in their lives gradually exposed them to sports over time, these athletes' decisions to specialize in a particular sport was influenced by the extent to which they felt connected to those associated with the sport as well as the extent to which they felt they could be successful in their respective sport (Stevenson, 1999). Their development of strong athletic identities was positively associated with commitment to sports. In other words, these elite competitors grew more involved in sports as the people they viewed as important recognized and defined them as athletes. As athletes' decisions are predicated on structural and cultural factors, Stevenson (1999) asserts sports socialization involves multiple interactive processes rather than passive ones. In a social world, the maintenance of an athletic identity is inextricably linked to other salient cultural identifiers like race, gender, age, and sexuality (Comeaux, Speer, Taustine, & Harrison, 2011). Influential

structural factors include the availability of and access to necessary resources like equipment, facilities, coaches, and competition (Houlihan & Green, 2007).

Donnelly and Young (1999) similarly emphasize the connection between sports and complex processes of identity formation. They assert becoming an athlete is a four-step process that includes acquiring knowledge about the sport, interacting with people involved in the sport, learning from one another what is expected in the sport, and becoming recognized and fully accepted as an athlete by other athletes in a particular sport culture. The decision to participate in sports is often tied to its perception as a culturally important pathway to gaining social acceptance and actualizing personal goals. For example, Coakley and White (1999) found that young people participated in sports when it helped them gain control over their lives, achieve a variety of goals, and improve others' perceptions of them. Simply, most people play sports when they believe it will add something positive to their lives. However, as social conditions and relationships change over time, so do the reasons people decide to play and eventually depart from sports (Funk & James, 2001).

Between 1950 and 1980, a conflation of interests led to a proliferation of research seeking to understand and remedy youth departure from organized sport programs. Parents of baby boomer children wanted to know if sports would build character and teach American values; coaches desired to understand how to better develop and prepare athletes for elite competition; and academics and other social critics sought confirmation of whether or not big-time sport programs were exploiting college athletes and leaving them unprepared for life beyond athletics (Goldstein & Bredemeier, 1977). The literature that emerged provides great insights into changing and ending sport participation

(Coakley, 2014). Athletes do not cut all ties with sports when they drop out of a particular sport; as they age, they tend to play different and less competitive sports, take on reduced roles in the same sports, or transition to other sport-related roles like coaching, administration, and management (Coakley, 2009). Through interviews with 34 athletes who had ceased or reduced sport participation between the ages of 18 and 24, Koukouris (1994) sought to understand the process of disengagement from formally organized competitive sport. Although exploitation, injuries, and other negative experiences sometimes precipitate athletic disengagement, he found that dropping out of sports is commonly associated with other developmental changes, like transitioning from the educational to the professional world and/or starting a family. After long careers absent opportunities to develop identities outside of athletics, those most committed to sports are much more likely to struggle as they transition into other relationships, activities, and careers (Wheeler, Steadward, Legg, Hutzler, Campbell, & Johnson, 1999).

Research on the impact of athletic participation examines participants' daily experiences, the social worlds they create, and the ideological messages they produce seeks to understand the extent to which sports build character and improve health and physical well being (Stevenson, 1999). More than 50 years of literature fails to consistently define character, fully understand the complex relationship between sports and socialization, and delineate the difference between athletes and nonathletes (Stoll & Beller, 1998). Further, faulty assumptions about the homogeneity of athletic experiences and their unique benefits have caused scholars to overlook the diversity in experiences and outcomes, other influences when assessing how and if sports *build* character, the differential perceptions of what benefits of participation in organized sports means across

students and over time, and the social and cultural contexts of sport socialization (Hartmann, 2008; Kidd & MacDonnell, 2007). Consequently, general statements about whether or not sports develop character cannot be made.

For nearly every competitive sport, the risk of injury alone is so high it outweighs any potential health benefits (White, 2004). Accordingly, a startling amount of research suggests that sports may actually be unhealthy (Abernathy & Bleakley, 2007; Messner, 2002; Murphy & Waddington, 2007; White, 2004). Among both female and male adolescents, sport is the main cause of injury (Abernathy & Bleakley, 2007). All but two competitive sports (basketball and volleyball) were the omitted from the U.S. Surgeon General's list of healthy physical activities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). While rhythmic, non-competitive, self-controlled exercises (e.g. sit-ups, push-ups, lunges dips, squats, and other calisthenics) are the healthiest form of physical activity, benefits decline as sports become more competitive (Waddington, 2000a; 2000b). Likewise, high contact, competitive sports are more likely to leave a participant injured than jobs in construction, oil rigging, and mining (Swartz, 2004). The injury risks are most exacerbated in heavy contact sports like football, where players violently and aggressively wield their bodies like weapons for athletic success (Young, 1993). Research on obesity, another indicator of health, reports more troubling findings for participating in the most popular American sport: football. Between 1985 and 2008, while competitive sports grew in popularity, obesity rates among young and adult participants have more than doubled (Coakley, 2009; Duncan, 2008). In the NFL, for example, while fewer than 10 players weighed over 300 pounds between 1920 and 1985, 570 players weighed more than 300 pounds in 2006 (Frias & Hartnett, 2006). Similar

patterns of obesity exist in college and high school football, the most frequently played of all school-sponsored sports (Keller, 2007).

Although he ultimately concludes the research is largely contradictory and inconclusive, Coakley (2014) identifies both positive and negative factors associated with sport participation. Positive socialization outcomes are associated with:

Opportunities to explore and develop identities apart from playing sports; knowledge-building experiences that go beyond the locker room and playing field; new relationships, especially with people who are not connected with sports and do not base their interaction on a person's status or identity as an athlete; explicit examples of how lessons learned in sports may be applied to specific situations apart from sports; and opportunities to develop and display competence in nonsport activities that are observed by other people who can serve as mentors and advocates outside sports. (p. 103)

Contrarily, sport participation is most likely to have negative consequences when “it constricts a person's opportunities, experiences, relationships, and general competence apart from sports” (p. 103).

### Popularization of Highly Organized Competitive Youth Sports

Highly organized competitive sports—characterized by considerable amounts of formalized practice time, extensive attendance by adult spectators, exclusivity to the most talented athletes, and selection of winners on various levels—did not exist for youth until the conflation of a couple of distinct, yet related developments in the early twentieth century (Wiggins, 2013).

First, as organized sport became an American obsession for spectators, participants' supposed advantages facilitated its inclusion in school curriculum (Majumdar & Hong, 2006). Originating in the college environment, spreading to high schools, and eventually trickling down to elementary schools, physical education placed

competitive sport within the grasp of preadolescent boys (Wiggins, 2013). Prior to the 1930s, schools, playgrounds, and a handful of national youth membership agencies (i.e., Boy Scouts, the Y.M.C.A., and other Boys' Clubs) provided recreational activities for organized sports for boys under age 12. In fact, the initial acceptance and promotion of competitive sports by schools thrust them so deep into the American mainstream that outside organizations began to sponsor competitive programs, while physical education professionals, educators, and researchers went on a crusade to remove them from elementary schools for undermining educational objectives (Wiggins).

Between the 1930s and 1960s, organized competitive youth sports were frequently critiqued for forcing kids to focus on one sport too early in their development (Mitchell, 1932); the exclusion of non-stellar athletes (Duncan, 1951); and physical, psychological and emotional strain (American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, 1952). Additionally, championship play and post season games (Moss & Orion, 1939) were criticized for their overt emphasis on winning and rewards (Skinner, 1945) as well as their expensive and time-consuming nature (Mitchell, 1932). The litany of publications disapproving of competitive sports in schools (AAHPER, 1952; 1963; 1968) left room for less intense physical activity and contributed heavily to the growth of intramural sports (House, 1931; Roop, 1932). One 44-state survey, for example, reports that only 10% of elementary schools sponsored interscholastic competition in 1940 (Georgiady & Savage, 1940). When schools dropped the sponsorship of competitive sport programs, child related organizations and 'boys work groups,' or volunteer organizations focused on boys' social welfare and their development into upstanding American citizens, picked up where they left off (Wiggins).



The second major development was the paradigmatic shift in Americans' understanding of the value of sport and how these beliefs allowed boys work groups to thrive. An abundance of literature in the first decades of the twentieth century evidences that childhood was regarded as an increasingly important stage in the human life cycle (Bell, 1903; Bühler, 1930; Claparède, 1911; Hager, Hartwig, Houston, La Salle, McNeely, & Wayman, 1950; Hall, 1904, 1920; Key, 1909). Concerned individuals and relatively newer organizations took it upon themselves to provide opportunities for proper growth and development. Most notably, the boys work groups, as did much of America, believed that sport was the exclusive method to exercise boys' minds and bodies (Wiggins, 2013). In 1890, Theodore Roosevelt wrote:

There is a certain tendency to underestimate or overlook the need of the virile, masterful qualities of the heart and mind...there is no better way of counteracting this tendency than by encouraging bodily exercise and especially the sports, which develop such qualities as courage, resolution and endurance. (as cited in Gorn & Goldstein, 1993, p. 98)

Americans were not only confident competitive sport prevented delinquency, built character, and promoted physical fitness, democratic living, general education, citizenship, and sportsmanship, but many were also skeptical of its reported detriments (Foster, 1930; Johnson, 1907; Kennedy, 1931; Landon, 1930; Thrasher, 1936). As the perceived benefits of competitive sport for individual participants and society in general were too established in the American imagination to prevent young boys from playing them, the boys' work groups successfully provided opportunities for competitive sport whenever students were not in school—evenings, weekends, and summers (Wiggins, 2013). Therefore, it was outside the educational context that highly organized competitive youth sports became prevalent in American culture.

Organized youth sports continued to grow dramatically in size and popularity with the postwar baby boom and the social changes taking place in the 1950s. Eager to develop their children holistically, new parents got them involved in organized sports, and subsequently became involved themselves (Mandelbaum, 2004). While mothers catered their domestic schedules around organized sports, fathers became coaches and other league administrators and daughters cheered for their brothers from the bleachers, as organized sports were mostly geared towards boys eight to 14 years old. In recent decades, the impact and popularity of organized competitive youth sports has ballooned because they: provide supervision after school and during the summer for households with two working parents (Dukes & Coakley, 2002); are believed to be an indication of good parenting (Coakley, 2006); keep children occupied and out of trouble (Sternheimer, 2006); are regarded as safe alternatives to the dangers lurking in the home (Nack & Munson, 2000); and gain players social acceptance among family and friends and thus, are viewed by participants as enjoyable and culturally valued (Opdyke, 2007).

### **History, Evolution, and Critiques of Intercollegiate Athletics**

The enterprise of intercollegiate athletics has been the subject of perpetual debate since its inception (Thelin, 2011). Seemingly, the multifarious roles sports maintain in the postsecondary educational environment create a uniquely complex dynamic in the United States, the only country where competitive sports are so closely connected to higher learning (Thelin, 2011). Whereas serious athletes in other countries compete in local clubs and leagues completely removed from scholastic pursuits, the U.S. develops the majority of its elite athletic talent on college and university campuses (Sperber, 2000). Almost 2,000 American college and universities sponsor athletic teams and nearly four

percent of all enrolled undergraduates, approximately half a million students, compete at the varsity level every year (Suggs, 2008). Under the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) governance, more than 1,200 member institutions sponsor a total of 18,835 sports teams that compete for championships and feature approximately 463,202 student-athletes (NCAA, 2013b).

For college athletes, the playing field may be a character-building, experiential classroom where lessons on discipline, teamwork, and perseverance can be taught more holistically (Bowen & Levin, 2003). Still, as spectator sports have served essential university functions since the mid-nineteenth century, the ethical compromises made to field winning teams have been the primary source of tension between the academic mission of colleges and the competitive mission of athletic departments (Harper & Donnor, 2015; Smith, 2000). The self-appointed governing body contends college sports engage students; improve academic performance; help develop transferable skills; foster physical fitness; generate school spirit, unity and pride; promote parental, alumni, and community support; and provide opportunities for students to display their diverse skills. Simultaneously, critics assert college sports distract students from educationally purposeful activities; distort academic values; perpetuate dependence and conformity; pacify spectators; deprive educational programs of resources; and subject athletes to injury and isolation in culturally hostile campus climates (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Clotfelter, 2011; Coakley, 2009; Duderstadt, 2009; Harper & Donnor, 2015; Lapchick, 2006; Overly, 2005; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Sperber, 1999, 2000; Suggs, 2008; Van Rhee, 2011). As such, intercollegiate athletics remain "American higher education's 'peculiar institution'. Their presence is pervasive, yet their

proper balance with academics remains puzzling” (Thelin, 2011, p. 1). The following chronicles the history of intercollegiate athletics, from its European origins through its evolution from “amateur” sport to a professionalized, commercial entity.

### The Origin of College Sport

Competitive sports emerged on European campuses during The Middle Ages when the advent of residential colleges increased the leisure time students would eventually fill with games (Suggs, 2008). Mangan and Park (1987) trace the origins of rowing, cricket, horseracing, tennis, badminton, and racquetball to Great Britain’s leading universities (Cambridge and Oxford) and elite preparatory schools (Eton and Westminster), where the sons of titled nobility and landed gentry have been playing them since the sixteenth century.

Prominent among British aristocracy, the amateur ideal was more of an exclusionary tactic than a noble principle (Veblen, 1953). Based on genetics alone, the aristocracy was believed to be qualitatively superior to the working classes (Moore, 1993). Similarly, leisure activities were believed to be qualitatively superior to professional ones (Veblen, 1953). Unconcerned with material gain, the gentlemen-aristocrat participated in sports merely for the love of the game. Though he tried to do everything well, investing too much time, effort, or energy into a single activity to individually acquire merit was considered plebeian (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). Thus, the elite avoided professional drill and methodical instruction to distance themselves from even highly trained professionals, regarded as “overdeveloped in one direction, atrophied in all others” (Perry, 1904, p. 25). In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen (1953) explains that abstention from labor, excess effort, and training was a status indicator

derived from Ancient Greece. Meant only for those born into immense privilege, amateur sports were reserved for the aristocracy.

Though the amateur ideal upheld the academic traditions of a liberal arts education within the context of the university setting, the inherent class bias was easily recognized elsewhere, creating controversy among the masses (Sack & Stauirowsky, 1998). The “mechanics clause,” for example, was inserted into early definitions of amateurism to exclude members of the working class who were never compensated for athletic performance. In 1866, the Amateur Athletic Club of England defined an amateur as:

Any gentleman who has never competed in an open competition, or for any public money, or for admission money, or with professionals for a prize, public money, or admission money, and who has never in any period of his life taught or assisted in the pursuit of athletic exercises as a means of livelihood; nor as a mechanic, artisan, or labourer. (Glader, 1978, p. 19)

While the alleged rationale behind barring manual laborers from amateur sports was the unfair physical advantage they derived from the rigor of their daily occupational activities, the aristocracy’s exclusion of them was more about perpetuating difference, maintaining hierarchies, and retaining their own elite social status (Sack & Stauirowsky, 1998).

When the British aristocracy began to decline in the late nineteenth century, so too did the amateur spirit. The amateur ideal lost considerable ground in 1889, after the British suffered humiliating military defeats to South Africa in the Boer War. In *A Nation of Amateurs*, Brodrick (1900) argued that the militaristic blunders were a consequence of amateurism, which rendered the British careless, weak, and lacking in method and training. When international competition drove agricultural prices down, the property of

the aristocracy lost value, leaving them vulnerable and competing with the new middle class for employment (Cannadine, 1990). During these increasingly industrial times, the demand for highly skilled professionals grew while the dominance of Great Britain's leisure class faded (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998).

#### From Aristocratic to American Amateurs, 1840-1910

Though very few American colonists were aristocrats in England, they adopted many of the landed gentry's customs (Mandell, 1984), from fashion and lifestyle to educational standards (Morison, Commager, & Lechten, 1980). Founded in 1636, Harvard was a "rustic imitation" of the elite British schools (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998), borrowing architectural style and classic curriculum from Oxford and Cambridge (Morison et al.). Meanwhile, wealthier colonists continued the sporting activities of Great Britain's leisure class. By the onset of the Revolutionary War in 1776, over two dozen English sports had been adapted, becoming an intricate part of American life (Mandell, 1984). Particularly popular at colleges were class contests that hazed incoming first-year students by pitting them against older cohorts (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). Recreationally motivated and organized and governed by students, campus athletics continued in the amateur spirit. Viewing it as an increasingly integral component of the curriculum, most Northeastern colleges erected departments dedicated entirely to physical activity (Smith, 2000). As physical education became a discipline, competitive sports grew into an obsession (Suggs, 2008, p. 4).

The circumstances surrounding the very first intercollegiate contest, for example, suggest college sports have been problematic and in need of greater regulation since at least 1852 (Harper & Donnor, 2015; Smith, 2000). To promote a new resort hotel built

along his powerful Boston, Concord, and Montreal railroad line, James Elkins sponsored a lavish regatta between Harvard and Yale (Smith, 2000). Desperate to best its academic rival Yale in this eight-day boat race, Harvard hired and fielded a professional coxswain disguised as a student. In a review of the history of intercollegiate athletics, Suggs (2008) reports virtually all of its evils were present at this initial event: “external corporations were using college sports to advertise their own services; teams were bending the rules on academically eligible athletes; and everyone was gambling on everything” (pp. 4-5). Out of these concerns came the shift from student-controlled athletic teams to faculty oversight (Duderstadt, 2009).

By the turn of the century, the inability of colleges to control sports signaled the need for regulation beyond the institutional level (Smith, 2000). The athletic conferences created as a result were also largely ineffective, and elite university presidents continually denounced the increasingly commercial and dangerous nature of football. In 1903, Charles Eliot, Harvard’s president at the time, offered a particularly compelling critique: “death and injuries are not the strongest argument against football” (as cited in Branch, 2011, p. 5), “that cheating and brutality are profitable is the main evil.” Despite several attempts by Walter Camp to make it safer, with minimal padding and optional helmet usage, the game remained violent by design. Resultantly, faculty at several schools attempted to abolish the sport. After 21 deaths and 200 injuries in the 1904 season, newspapers and other editorials condemned the brutality and corruption in college football, bringing national attention to the issue (Smith, 2000).

To restore ethical conduct, President Theodore Roosevelt invited select college football leaders to a White House conference in 1905. At this meeting, Roosevelt, an avid

outdoorsman, admirer of football, and strong believer in amateurism, declared no student who has ever been compensated in any way for his athletic ability was allowed to participate in intercollegiate athletics (Byers & Hammer, 1995). As death, injuries, and corruption continued, a larger national conference was convened by New York University Chancellor Henry MacCracken to decide whether football could be reformed or if it would have to be eradicated altogether, resulting in the creation of a Rules Committee (Sperber, 2009). Later that year, when representatives from both the White House and NYU conferences met to reform college football rules, the Intercollegiate Athletic Association (IAA)—renamed the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1910, was formed as a regulatory body to ensure both fairness and safety (Smith, 2000). Among its founding principles was the amateur ideal adopted from the British aristocracy.

#### The Professionalization of Amateur Sport, 1910-1984

During its infancy, the NCAA was not a major player in the governance of intercollegiate athletics. For the first 20 years, students, infrequently monitored by faculty, remained in control (Smith, 2000). In the 1920s, the advent of the radio, the building of megalithic stadiums, the spreading of college football to the South and other regions of the U.S., and the development of successful and entertaining programs allowed for greater fan interest in intercollegiate sports. The 1927 Rose Bowl became the first coast-to-coast U.S. broadcast, signifying the transition of college athletes into local, regional, and national folk heroes (Suggs, 2008). The rapid growth of the college sport enterprise also opened it up to further criticism for its pervasive issues.



In *American College Athletics*, Savage, Bentley, McGovern, & Smiley (1929)

made national headlines and exposed 81 of 112 schools surveyed for recruiting athletes and paying them in a variety of prohibited ways, from disguised booster funds and illegal athletic scholarships called “subsidies” to non-existent show jobs. Findings from the Carnegie Foundation report launched the national debate over whether college athletes should be paid. The discussion would return to the forefront in 1939, when first-year athletes at the University of Pittsburgh went on strike because their upperclassmen teammates were getting paid more than them (Smith, 2000).

By 1946, the NCAA had grown so embarrassed by its inability to alleviate exploitative recruitment practices, bribery, and rampant gambling scandals that it convened with conference officials from across the country to develop a 12-point code of ethics to “restore” sanity in college athletics (Sperber, 2000). Seeking to reach a compromise between the Southern schools in favor of full athletic scholarships and schools in the Ivy League that advocated for all students be treated the same, the “Sanity Code” prohibited schools from compensating athletes beyond free tuition and meals (Smith, 2000). Enacted in 1948, it set a momentous precedent in intercollegiate athletics as it “abandoned the NCAA’s forty-two-year-old commitment to amateur principles and allowed financial aid to be awarded on the basis of athletic ability” (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998, p. 44). The three-person Constitutional Compliance Committee created to enforce the penalties would prove unsuccessful by 1950, when member institutions agreed complete expulsion from the NCAA was too harsh a punishment for violating the new policies (Suggs, 2008). The Sanity Code made two things evident: not only had the

amateur ideal, as it existed among the British aristocracy, been lost, but also the NCAA needed to strengthen its rule enforcement capacity.

During the 1950s, the NCAA began to more industriously exercise its authority. In 1951, the Association repealed the Sanity Code and replaced the Constitutional Compliance Committee with the Committee on Infractions, the rules-enforcement system in place today (Suggs, 2008). The appointment of Walter Byers as the NCAA's first Executive Director was also pivotal, as he was instrumental in setting several precedents that would strengthen the Association and its enforcement division (Smith, 2000). Byers and the Committee on Infractions were tested almost immediately as two major scandals, grade counterfeiting in football and point shaving and gambling in basketball, rocked college sports later that year (Suggs, 1999). While other reform efforts were failing, the Committee on Infractions handed the University of Kentucky and iconic coach Adolph Rupp the first-ever "death penalty." Barring the Wildcats from competition for the entire 1952 season created an "aura of centralized command for an NCAA office that barely existed" (Branch, 2011, p. 6).

Perhaps Byers' most salient win was the legal battle leading to the creation of the term "student-athlete." When the widow of Ray Dennison—a Fort Lewis A&M Aggies football player who died of a head injury—tried to sue the NCAA for workmen's compensation death benefits (Sperber, 2000), the NCAA placed the word "student" in front of "athlete" to emphasize players' statuses as students, to prevent them from being identified as employees, and to promote the amateur ideal of academics over athletics. In a rapid yet calculated response to "the dreaded notion that athletes could be identified as employees by state industrial commissions and the courts," Byers "crafted the term

student-athlete, and soon it was embedded in all NCAA rules and interpretations as a mandated substitute for words as players and athletes” (Byers & Hammer, 1995, p. 69). Preserving the image of college athletes being students first, athletes second, and employees never, the ambiguous term has been an exclusive shield for the NCAA, serving as an effective legal defense (Van Rheenen, 2013).

The NCAA quickly transformed into a self-sustaining bureaucracy under Byers. The revenue generated by televising the college football “Game of the Week” ballooned after the NCAA forced football powerhouses the Universities of Pennsylvania and Notre Dame out of independent television deals (Watterson, 2002). In 1952, Byers’ maneuvering resulted in NBC paying the NCAA \$1.4 million for a restricted football package, enough to rent a headquarters in Kansas City, Missouri (Branch, 2011). By the mid 1950s the NCAA’s men’s basketball tournament was the premier invitational tournament. It became an increasingly profitable national phenomenon with its expansion to 48 teams in 1975 and the storied collegiate rivalry between Indiana State’s Larry Bird and Michigan State’s Magic Johnson in 1979 (Suggs, 2008). According to Falla (1981), the \$100,000 the NCAA made in revenue in 1947 reached \$500,000 in 1967, \$1 million in 1972, and \$22 million in 1981.

Throughout the 1970s, the growing interest in and commercialization of college sports increased the NCAA’s enforcement capacity so much that the Association was being accused of unfairly exercising its power (Smith, 2000). To address these concerns, the NCAA added checks and balances by dividing the prosecutorial and investigative roles of the Committee on Infractions, and by separating member institutions into three competitively homogenous groups called divisions.

### Evolution into a Commercial Enterprise (1984-present)

University presidents grew more directly concerned about the operation of the NCAA in the 1980s, viewing athletic programs as potential sources of expenses, revenue, and public relations, as well as reflections of their professional reputations (Duderstadt, 2009). The concurrent pressures placed on university presidents by boosters, alumni, and faculty (namely, managing ethical compromises while fielding winning teams) caused them to take more active roles in governance. In 1984, the recently created Presidents Commission began demonstrating their collective power (Smith, 1988). By 1985, college and university presidents appeared to be “running college sports” when they exercised their authority to call a special convention (Smith, 2000). Though their efforts to contain athletic costs remained largely unsuccessful, these institutional leaders became particularly relevant in the governance of college sports, restructuring the NCAA with the addition of a Board of Directors and an Executive committee for each of the three divisions (Duderstadt).

Important developments continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s as television watching, the profitability of broadcasting deals, and the popularity of college basketball significantly increased. When the Supreme Court ruled the NCAA limitations on the televising of football games were in violation of antitrust laws in *NCAA v. Board of Regents* (1984), the Association’s monopoly over broadcasting was lifted, opening the floodgates of opportunity for powerful conferences to negotiate their own contracts (Watterson, 2002). As gambling and the introduction of the point spread made basketball more popular, stakeholders quickly realized, that relative to football, basketball was inexpensive and ideal for broadcasting. The national tournament, for example, had grown

exponentially more popular since expanding its format in 1975. In 1984, CBS paid \$1 billion for its exclusive broadcasting rights (Smith, 2000). Commercialization reached new heights as cable television, major athletic conferences, and ESPN attempted to quell the insatiable appetites of sports fans, scheduling day and night games throughout the week and on weekends. In 1999, CBS renegotiated broadcasting rights for the tournament, paying the NCAA \$6 billion over 11 years, approximately \$550 million annually. By drastically increasing the value of intercollegiate athletics, basketball swiftly went from a minor sport to a major consideration, confirming what academics had feared all along: whoever makes the money makes the rules (Duderstadt, 2009).

Most recently, the role of intercollegiate athletics, once believed by college presidents and the NCAA to be about the holistic development of its participants, has shifted to generating revenue and providing national entertainment (Overly, 2005). College basketball and football have become almost entirely commercial entities, facilitating the professionalization of college athletics conferences, some of which, the Big Ten for example, televise more sporting events than the most popular professional sports leagues (Duderstadt, 2009). Sports press and media, none more so than television, have increased the demand for big-time college sports, resulting in the Association lengthening regular seasons and raising questions about adding and standardizing postseasons (Thelin, 2011). As the value of big-time college sports continues to increase so too will the consequences of commercialism.

### **DI Student-Athlete Experiences and Outcomes in Contemporary College Sports**

Literature on the campus experiences of student-athletes was scarce until the 1980s when the NCAA passed several eligibility rules to address growing concerns about

their learning and personal development, particularly those playing the big-time sports of men's basketball and football (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Despite them garnering publicity, fostering school pride, providing entertainment, and generating billions of dollars in revenue for the DI institutions they attend, the NCAA's amateurism principle prevents student-athletes from receiving compensation beyond athletic scholarships (Van Rhee, 2012). Thus, the ethical question at the center of college sports is: how do participants benefit from the college experience relative to their nonathlete peers? Accordingly, the extant literature seeks to understand the challenges to student-athletes' educational success, from psychosocial and identity-related challenges (Martin, 2009; (Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000) to various issues related to career planning, academic motivation, and post-college outcomes (Adler & Adler, 1987; Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Pascarella & Smart, 1991).

### Balancing Complex Roles and Identities

According to Gecas and Burke (1995), identity comprises “who or what one is” and “the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others” (p. 42). Self-identity refers to how one views oneself while social identity refers to how the self is viewed by others. Athletic identity, if understood as a social role (Astle, 1986), encompasses the obligations—behavioral, affective, cognitive, and social—associated with identifying with said role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Student-athletes are a unique college population for whom success entails putting in hard work, showing dedication, and performing in the classroom as well as on the field and court (Simons, Rhee, and Covington, 1999). Beyond balancing the academic and social demands that their non-athlete peers do, they must also manage a bevy of exhaustive athletic demands including

travelling, practicing, and competing (Watt & Moore, 2001). Athletes in Division I—the NCAA’s most competitive, lucrative, and popular level—receive elevated levels of social reinforcement for their athletic prowess, and often disproportionately develop their athletic identities. When their sports are in season, for example, student-athletes typically spend more than twenty hours per week on sport related activities, miss several classes, and endure bodily injury and fatigue (Wolverton, 2008). Even keeping track of the complex set of rules and requirements the NCAA and athletic conferences have mandated student-athletes adhere to in order to remain eligible for intercollegiate athletic competition can be time-consuming and arduous. Hence, being an athlete is at the center of both their self-identity and social identity. Logically, identity foreclosure, defined as “a commitment to an identity before one has meaningfully explored other options or engaged in exploratory behavior, such as career exploration, talent development, or joining social clubs or interest groups” (Beamon, 2012, p. 196), is prevalent among undergraduate men on revenue generating basketball and football teams (Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, & Bimper, 2011).

In a national study on their perceptions of their college experience, 62 percent of student-athletes reported participation in intercollegiate athletics contributed to them viewing themselves more as athletes than as students (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2006). The majority of participants expressed wanting to spend more time on academics and pursue more professional and educational opportunities such as internships and research with faculty. For 80 percent of them, athletics was the main reason they were unable to. Fittingly, the literature on DI student-athletes routinely argues that the problematic academic, psychosocial, and career development outcomes they experience are a function

of the institutions' inability to engage them in activities beyond sports (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Gaston-Gayles, 2009, 2015; Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009a, 2009b; Martin, 2009).

Student engagement can be defined as the quality of efforts students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities both inside and outside the classroom that contribute directly to desired outcomes (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). They range from reading, writing, studying for and attending class to interacting with peers, staff, and faculty as well as participating in student groups and organizations and other curricular and cocurricular activities (Gaston-Gayles, 2015). Ideally, postsecondary environments support students' efforts with policies and practices that facilitate participation in these productive activities (Kuh et al., 2005). However, DI institutions with high profile athletic programs persistently fail to do so (Overly, 2005).

Adler and Adler (1987, 1989, 1991) have provided much theoretical insight into the ways in which DI student-athletes balance their social, academic, and athletic roles. In one study, Adler & Adler (1987) use four years of participant observation and identity theory to examine conflict between and the changing salience of social, academic, and athletic roles of players on a major college basketball team at a private, medium-size, predominantly white university. They found: (1) the "overwhelmingly demanding athletic role," (2) the prioritization of athletics over academics, (3) the resulting "frustrations and failures in the academic realm," and (4) the lack of positive reinforcement in the academic sphere conflate to cause conflict between players' various roles (p. 452). To



resolve said conflicts, athletes' reconstruct the identity salience of their academic role by realigning, reducing, or in some cases, dropping it entirely.

Adler and Adler (1989) also identified a new form of self-identity, the glorified self. A public persona that differs from the athlete's private persona, it arises "when individuals become the focus of intense interpersonal and media attention, leading to their achieving celebrity" and is caused "in part by the treatment of individuals' selves as objects by others" (p. 229). Glorified in the media for their athletic prowess, and resultantly "treated with awe and respect" by large numbers of people (p. 301), student-athletes concept of self is heavily influenced by the daily face-to-face interactions with others on campus in which they are expected to live up to this media created persona (Adler & Adler, 1989). Thus, as social and academic roles are unrecognized, devalued, undermined, the immense privileging of athletic roles transforms athletes' identities and self-conceptions, increases their commitment to these roles, and eventually leads to the "glorified self" as the dominant master status (Adler & Adler, 1989).

From a longitudinal study of a DI men's basketball program, Adler and Adler (1991) have most recently discovered a phenomenon by which student-athletes privilege their athletic roles and responsibilities above their roles as students, as team practices, conditioning, games, and travel engulf their time and ultimately their identities. Role Engulfment theory posits that sport is the predominant, and sometimes exclusive, venue for student-athlete engagement. As they primarily live, eat, socialize, and take classes with teammates and other athletes, student-athletes are afforded limited opportunities to engage with non-athletic peers. Resultantly, they are socialized into a peer subculture that discourages exerting effort in academic activities, distracts them from studying, and

compels them to disassociate with other students who could provide greater academic role modeling. Essentially, the very nature of their athletic commitment vastly undermines their ability to fully integrate into the larger campus community and be academically successful.

### Academic Outcomes

The rate at which student-athletes graduate is the most commonly used metric to assess whether or not athletic programs are upholding the academic ideals of higher education institutions. Since the NCAA began collecting graduation rates in 1983, student-athletes' graduation rates have steadily increased (Zimbalist, 1999). By 1998, student-athletes (58 percent) were graduating at rates higher than their nonathlete peers (56 percent) (NCAA, 2000). Of the students who began college in 2004, 65 percent of the athletes graduated by 2010 as opposed to 63 percent of the general population (NCAA, 2011). Though overall student-athletes maintain higher graduation rates than their peers who do not play college sports, disaggregating the data by sport, race, gender, and division reveals longstanding and pervasive inequities, namely in revenue generating DI programs (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). While the NCAA's graduation success rate indicates over 80 percent of student-athletes who entered college between 1999 and 2003 have graduated within six years (Sander, 2010), women's graduation rates are typically higher than those of their male counterparts and Division II (DII) and Division III (DIII) schools typically graduate more students than DI schools (NCAA, 2011). Finally, despite the overall increases in graduation rates, athletes in the revenue generating sports of football and basketball are graduating at lower rates than any other collegiate athletes (NCAA, 2000; Zimbalist, 1999).

Many studies have found that relative to their peers, student-athletes are less prepared for the academic rigor of college, particularly those who are highly committed to their sport (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Shulman & Bowen, 2001). When they enter college with similar background characteristics though, the differences in academic performance are minimal (Aries, McCarthy, Salovey, & Banaji, 2004; Pascarella & Smart, 1991; Stuart, 1985). Research examining the impact of participation in intercollegiate athletics finds it may negatively influence student learning for specific populations (McBride & Reed, 1998). For example, men on revenue generating sports teams are not experiencing cognitive benefits to the extent other college males are (Gaston-Gayles, 2009). Men's basketball and football are the only sports in which participants scored lower in reading comprehension and mathematics than non athletes and athletes in other sports (Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, and Terenzini, 1995). They also consistently scored lower on other cognitive development measures such as critical thinking and scientific reasoning.

At colleges and universities with high profile sports programs, student-athletes are also often subject to the pervasive "dumb jock" stereotype. Assumed to be inept and incapable of performing well in the classroom, student-athletes are stigmatized by peers, administrators, alumni, and faculty (Howard-Hamilton & Watt, 2001). Perhaps most detrimentally, Parsons (2013) suggest professors may hold more negative attitudes toward college athletes than any other postsecondary stakeholders. Thus, student-athletes regularly encounter low expectations in classrooms where professors are skeptical of their academic abilities and surprised when they earn A's on assignments (Parsons, 2013). According to Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen (1995), both revenue and not revenue athletes are subject to their professor's prejudicial attitudes and stereotyping.

This is particularly troubling as Comeaux and Harrison (2007) report positive, supporting and encouraging interactions with faculty are especially critical for the academic success of athletes in revenue generating programs.

### Career Development and Transition Outcomes

Fewer than two percent of all college men's basketball and football players will play at the professional level (Coakley, 2009). The other 98% of student-athletes need to be prepared to procure and perform jobs outside, as the vast majority of them will never play sports so competitively again (Martin, 2009). Touted as a priceless opportunity to procure an education and a job, surprisingly little is known about the ways in which participation in intercollegiate athletics impacts students' ability to actualize career aspirations (Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2013). The scant research suggests Division I student-athletes are most likely to experience unhealthy transitions out of sports.

As they ended their sport careers and adjusted to post sport life, revenue athletes reported career transition difficulties and negative emotions, from feelings of loss and identity crises to distress (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; McKenna & Thomas, 2007; Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2013). While their non-sport peers utilize the professional services available on campus more than them, college athletes endure a host of psychological and mental health related issues as much or more than them—fear of success, identity conflict, social isolation, and career anxiety (Park et al., 2013). Assessments of collegiate male athletes' life satisfaction at the termination of their collegiate careers indicated that Black athletes and students who did not have employment plans for after college were significantly less satisfied with life (Perna, Ahlgren, & Zaichkowsky, 1999). Those with the strongest athletic identities at the time of sport retirement experience the greatest loss

of identity (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally, 2007) and need more time to adjust to life without it (Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). A function of the prioritization of athletic over academic and professional development, some revenue athletes depart from college less developed and prepared for life than when they entered.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODS**

#### **Chapter Overview**

This chapter describes the research methods used to investigate how DI student-athletes experienced college as well as the amateurism policies governing intercollegiate sports. It begins with a rationale for my use of qualitative research methods and a description of phenomenology, the methodological approach that guides this study. Following is an outline of the methods used to select the sample and site for data collection. It then explains the procedures used to collect and analyze data. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness of the data, as well as my background and role in the study.

#### **Rationale for Qualitative Inquiry**

Four characteristics distinguish qualitative and quantitative approaches to social science research (Patton, 2002). First, participants in qualitative research are not selected for the purpose of making generalizations about the larger population, but instead for their rich insights into the phenomena under investigation. In this study, student-athletes who played at least three years of DI college football shared their appraisals of the amateurism policies governing college sports. Second, as opposed to measurement, qualitative research focuses on understanding and describing the essence and wholeness of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This study, for example, sought to understand how amateurism policies impacted the student-athlete experience, particularly in regard to their educational and professional expectations and outcomes. Third, as the researcher is often the data collection instrument in qualitative research, her or his personal

experiences and insights can be critical in interpreting the findings that emerge (Patton, 2002). For this reason, qualitative researchers must be particularly mindful of and committed to acknowledging the biases they may possess (Creswell, 2007). Finally, whereas quantitative research presents findings using numerical reports, qualitative research typically presents findings using narration, storytelling, themes, and verbatim quotes.

### Rationale for Use of Qualitative Methods

Primarily conducted for national level decision-making purposes, the majority of research on the student-athlete experience has been quantitative, employing large-scale data sources with representative samples (Gaston-Gayles, 2009). This section outlines the rationale for using qualitative methods to understand the experiences of elite intercollegiate athletes. First, qualitative methods are best for answering *how* and *what* questions (Creswell, 2007). The research questions guiding the study asked *how* DI athletes experienced amateurism as participants in intercollegiate athletics as well as *what* they perceived to be the costs and benefits of their participation. Second, if the goal of research is to generate rich descriptive data and the outcomes of an inquiry are not yet known, qualitative methods are ideal (Creswell, 2007). They afford researchers the opportunity to use detailed information to explore topics or phenomena. Finally, qualitative methods are useful for understanding the experiences of individuals within their respective environments (Creswell, 2007). As this study sought to understand how athletes' experienced amateurism within their varied institutional contexts, qualitative methods are particularly useful and appropriate.

### Methodological Approach: Phenomenology

Researchers who subscribe to the belief that qualitative methods cannot be used to determine effects are in essence arguing that students are incapable of reflecting sensibly and honestly on what they have experienced firsthand... college students are arguably best positioned to offer personalized data and perspectives that help shed light on the magnitude of how they were affected by something in their learning environment, participation in a program or activity, or interactions with faculty and student affairs educators. But again, such lived experiences are lost in institutional fetishes with aggregate analyses. (Harper, 2007, p. 58)

In the early 1900s, the German philosopher Edmund H. Husserl introduced phenomenology as “the study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses” (Patton, 2002, p. 105). This methodological approach to qualitative inquiry focuses on understanding and describing the lived experiences of people who have experienced a similar phenomenon, or a common set of conditions (Creswell, 2007). Typically, phenomenological studies deeply interrogate participants to provide rich and insightful self-reports of the phenomenon under study (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Not only do these types of accounts exhume a group’s common experience, but also they explain what participants have experienced, how they have experienced it, and the meanings they make of their shared experience (Moustakas, 1994). As they entail the construction of a rich textural summary (*what* each participant experienced) and a detailed structural summary (*how* each person experienced the context, program, or phenomenon), phenomenological methods are useful for making sense of how participants are affected by a unique set of circumstances, conditions, or policies (Moustakas, 1994). By the end of a phenomenological study, both the researcher and the readers ought to be able to say, “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (Polkinghorne, 1989, pg. 46). In this study, for example, the



phenomenon investigated was the experience of being an amateur athlete at a revenue-generating DI institution. By the end, readers should better understand how student-athletes experience amateurism policies.

### **Site: The “Power” Five Conferences (PFCs)**

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is the chief regulatory body for intercollegiate athletics in the United States. Under “the Association’s” governance, more than 1,200 member institutions, conferences, and organizations sponsor a total of 18,835 sports teams that compete for championships and feature approximately 463,202 student-athletes (NCAA, 2013b). Comprised of three levels, referred to as “divisions,” this study focuses on Division I. The top level of college football is the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), formerly Division I-A. In total, the FBS is comprised of 10 conferences and 128 member institutions. Within the FBS, there are five standout conferences, referred to as the “Big Five” or the “Power Five”—The Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), the Big Ten Conference (B1G), the Big 12 Conference (Big 12), the Pacific-12 Conference (Pac-12), and the Southeastern Conference (SEC). The ACC is comprised of 15 schools—Boston College, Clemson University, Duke University, Florida State University, Georgia Tech University, University of Louisville, University of Miami, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, North Carolina State University, University of Notre Dame, University of Pittsburgh, Syracuse University, University of Virginia, Virginia Tech University and Wake Forest University. The B1G is comprised of 14 schools—University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, Indiana University, University of Iowa, University of Maryland-College Park, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, Michigan State University, University of

Minnesota, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Northwestern University, Ohio State University, Pennsylvania State University, Purdue University, Rutgers University, University of Wisconsin-Madison. The Big 12 is comprised of 10 schools—Baylor University, Iowa State University, University of Kansas, Kansas State University, University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma State University, University of Texas-Austin, Texas Christian University, Texas Tech University, and West Virginia University. The Pac-12 is comprised of 12 schools—University of Arizona, Arizona State University, University of California-Berkeley, University of California-Los Angeles, University of Colorado-Boulder, University of Oregon, Oregon State University, University of Southern California, Stanford University, University of Utah, University of Washington, and Washington State University. The SEC is comprised of 14 schools— University of Alabama, University of Arkansas, Auburn University, University of Florida, University of Georgia, University of Kentucky, Louisiana State University, University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, University of Missouri, University of South Carolina, University of Tennessee, Texas A&M University, and Vanderbilt University. As of February 2015, there were a total of 65 colleges and universities in the five power conferences.

## **Sampling and Participants**

### Criterion Sampling

Criterion sampling methods use specific criteria to identify and select participants (Patton, 2002). The sample in this study was limited to student-athletes who played football for one of the 65 institutions within the ACC, B1G, Big 12, Pac-12, or SEC and was a senior. The five power conferences were chosen because the schools within them field the most popular, competitive, and lucrative football teams. Every NCAA DI football champion since 1989 has come from them. Their football conference champions receive automatic bids to the College Football Playoff (CFP)—a post-season series including six nationally televised football contests. Simply put, when Americans discuss college football, they are most often referring to the institutions that comprise these power conferences. This is particularly significant because the debate over the extent to which scholarship athletes are university employees who should be financially compensated is rooted in amateurism ideology. A thorough exploration of amateurism in intercollegiate athletics must be situated within the context of the revenue-generating sports. Finally, participants were required to be seniors who had, at the time of data collection, exhausted their eligibility. Thus, they were in no way jeopardizing their athletic careers to participate in this study. Still, this study was fundamentally about college. Seeking deeply reflective and detailed accounts of the revenue-generating athlete experience, it examined those who have spent the most time in the postsecondary environment to provide rich textural as well as detailed structural summaries (Moustakas, 1994). In all, there were 40 participants from 27 institutions in all five conferences. Tables 2 and 3 provide characteristics of the participants and their respective institutions.

<b>Table 2. Participant Demographics (N=40)</b>		
Athletic Conference	Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC)	13
	Big Ten Conference (B1G)	8
	Big 12 Conference (Big 12)	5
	Pacific-12 Conference (Pac-12)	11
	Southeastern Conference (SEC)	3
Race	White	26
	Black	7
	Latino	1
	Asian	3
	Multiracial	3
Undergraduate GPA	Mean	3.37
	Range	2.85-3.90
	Unreported	12
Undergraduate Major(s)	Business	14
	Journalism, Media, & Communications	2
	Science, Technology, Engineering, Math	9
	Social & Behavioral Sciences	3
	Double Majors	7
	Unreported	12
Family Structure	Single Parent	2
	Two Parent	26
	Other	0
	Unreported	12
Parental Educational Attainment	Both Parents Graduated College	24
	One Parent Graduated College	1
	Neither Parent Graduated College	3
	Unreported	12
Household Income	0-\$50K	1
	\$50K-\$100K	10
	\$100K+	16
	Unreported	13
Athletic Status	Walk-On	20
	Recruited	20

<b>Table 3. Institutional Characteristics (N=28)</b>		
National 4-Year Institutions	Arizona State University	
	Boston College	
	University of Colorado	
	University of Illinois	
	University of Indiana	
	Kansas State University	
	University of Louisville	
	University of Miami	
	University of Michigan	
	University of Minnesota	
	North Carolina State University	
	University of North Carolina	
	Northwestern University	
	University of Notre Dame	
	The Ohio State University	
	University of Oklahoma	
	Oregon State University	
	Penn State University	
	Purdue University	
	University of South Carolina	
	Stanford University	
	Syracuse University	
	University of Tennessee	
	University of Texas	
	Texas A&M University	
	University of Virginia	
	Wake Forest University	
	Washington State University	
Athletic Conference	Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC)	9
	Big Ten Conference (B1G)	7
	Big 12 Conference (Big 12)	3
	Pacific-12 Conference (Pac-12)	5
	Southeastern Conference (SEC)	3
Public or Private	Public	21
	Private	7
Competitiveness by Barron's Profiles of American Colleges	Most Competitive	8
	Highly Competitive (Plus)	6
	Highly Competitive	4
	Very Competitive	3

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data for this study were collected using individual and group interviews via the Blue Jeans online videoconferencing platform. The recruitment process began with the compilation of the names of every senior on each football team in the ACC, B1G, Big 12, Pac-12, or SEC. I first visited the conference websites to verify their institutional members. For each of the 65 schools, the football team roster was sorted by year and the names of more than 1,200 seniors were extracted and placed into an excel document. As public colleges and universities typically list contact information for students on their websites, a search of the campus directories yielded the emails of approximately 800 student-athletes. Once the University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted approval, personalized emails were sent to each player inviting them to participate in the study. After indicating interest in participating, the athletes were sent a second email with detail about the study, conditions of participation, and interview sign-up schedules. As students responded with their availability, they were placed into corresponding time slots.

The first round of invitations produced interest in the study, but only resulted in a couple of interviews. Recognizing the difficulty of coordinating focus groups across revenue athletes' schedules, some procedural amendments were made. One significant change was the decision to conduct individual interviews in conjunction with the group interviews to procure as many study participants as possible. The interview protocol was condensed to minimize participation time. While the initial group interviews typically lasted 60-90 minutes, the combination of the amended protocol and individual interviews shortened the average participation time to approximately 30 minutes. To minimize email

correspondence, the new invitation emails contained scheduling instructions as well as an attached *.pdf* document with details about the study and participation. The second time around, I was transparent about my eagerness to speak to every willing PFC athlete. I informed them that I would adjust my schedule to be free during any 30-minute time slot they had available. Lastly, I included my personal phone number so students could contact me via text message if they preferred that to email. Of the 90 student-athletes who replied indicating interest, 40 participated in the study, 10 individual and 10 group interviews.

During the interviews, I patiently sought to understand how the participants had experienced college as student-athletes. The 40 athletes were asked to reflect deeply upon their lived experiences as amateurs in high profile, highly lucrative football programs. They were also asked to talk about what they gained from and sacrificed for football to compare and contrast the costs and benefits of their participation in intercollegiate athletics. After participants were presented with excerpts and verbatim quotes from the NCAA manual, they were then asked to juxtapose these prompts with their own educational and professional expectations, experiences, and outcomes. Although a standard protocol was used, the interviews were semi-structured to permit both data collection and participant reflection. The intent is for discussions to become conversational, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences as college athletes and students (Patton, 2002). All interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed.

## Data Analysis

### Phenomenological Data Analysis

In *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, John Creswell (2007) explained phenomenological data analysis includes several phases—information reduction, analysis of relevant statements, identification of common themes, and a search for all possible meanings emerging from the data. The detailed step-by-step process Moustakas (1994) advanced in *Phenomenological Research Methods* remains the central approach to data analysis and thus, was carefully followed in this study.

The analysis phase began with *epoche*, a process of critical self-reflection Husserl introduced. Katz (1987) writes:

Epoche is a process that the researcher engages in to remove, or at least become aware of, prejudices, viewpoints or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Epoche helps enable the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from a fresh and open viewpoint without prejudgment or making meaning too soon. (p. 36)

Moustakas (1994) explains that to achieve an understanding of another's experience, the researcher must be willing to set aside his or her own personal views and experience. Therefore, the derived understanding was exclusively comprised of the reflections offered by those who have experienced the phenomenon. As Patton (2002) noted, epoche is not a fixed event, but an ongoing analytic process in which the researcher must consciously focus on participants' understandings and disregard their own. One technique used was *bracketing*. In order to see data uncontaminated by personal interference, I had to literally "bracket out" my assumptions (Patton, 2002).



In bracketing, the researcher holds the phenomenon up for serious inspection. It is taken out of the world where it occurs. It is taken apart and dissected... it is treated as text or a document; that is, an instance of the phenomenon that is being studied. It is not interpreted in terms of the standard meanings given to it by the existing literature. (Denzin, 1989, pp. 55-56)

Denzin lists the following continuous steps for bracketing:

1. Locating key phrases and statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in question.
2. Interpreting the meanings of these phrases.
3. Obtaining the subject's interpretations of these phrases.
4. Inspecting what meanings reveal about a phenomenon's essential recurring features.
5. Offering tentative definitions of phenomena based on these essential recurring features.

All of the aforementioned steps were taken as I carefully read and re-read each of the focus group transcripts line-by-line. By physically "setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions," Moustakas (1994) explains bracketing allows "things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time" (p. 84). Each transcript was approached like text with which I had limited familiarity. I bracketed out my thoughts and assumptions as I read each line of the transcripts. My random thoughts and assumptions—most of which were connected to my own personal experiences—were marked in the margin. After reviewing each transcript, I asked myself: "is this what the participants really meant; is the judgment I've made here

truly characteristic of their experiences?”

Once the data were bracketed, Moustakas (1994) recommends the researcher fully describe her or his experience of the phenomenon. Then, she or he should engage in *horizontalization*, the process of listing and giving equal value to each statement regarding how participants experience phenomena. After, I clustered the meanings into categories that best depict participants’ shared experiences.

The composition of text began with *textural descriptions* of “what” the participants experienced as amateur athletes in college (Moustakas, 1994). I summarized the participants’ accounts as they pertained to several thematic portions of the phenomenon. I then wrote composite descriptions to capture what participants experienced collectively. After, I depicted “how” participants experienced the phenomenon via *structural descriptions*. The composite textural and structural descriptions were woven together in Chapter Four to best illustrate the essence of the revenue-generating athlete experience.

### **Trustworthiness and Methods of Verification**

A qualitative research study is trustworthy when a researcher’s interpretation is truly reflective of participants’ experiences. Credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are the four measures Lincoln and Guba (1985, 1986) offer for evaluating trustworthiness. The first, credibility, is achieved when the researcher gathers multiple constructions of reality and participants verify her or his interpretations of these constructions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Measures to ensure credibility include: “referential adequacy,” or electronically storing audio or visual recordings; “member checks,” or reviewing the data and interpretations with study participants; identifying

“negative cases” that expand inquiry and analysis; triangulating data with multiple investigators, sources, theories, or methods; and greater engagement in the field. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe transferability as a measure of “fittingness,” or the extent to which a qualitative study’s findings can be transferred to other contextually similar environments. Thus, they emphasize that researchers clearly detail the settings under which the initial inquiry occurs. The final measures, dependability and confirmability, call for outside auditors to assess the completeness and suitability of the research methods and process as well as evaluate the entire product.

In this study, all four measures were taken into account to ensure trustworthiness. Credibility was addressed through referential adequacy, follow up interviews, and two types of member check procedures. First, each focus group participant was given an opportunity to review the transcript. They were then invited to validate the findings in a collaborative session in which they are asked to identify any inconsistencies, and when necessary, assist in making them more accurate. Vivid, systematically detailed descriptions of the site and participants increased transferability. The findings of this study agreeably transfer to other revenue-generating college sports, namely men’s basketball. A team of outside auditors was consulted to ensure dependability and confirmability.

### **Limitations**

Methodological and analytical shortcomings exist despite efforts to ensure trustworthiness of findings. First, this study was conducted with student-athletes on PFC teams. Findings cannot be generalized to nonrevenue-generating college sports. Second, while many of the seniors will not be playing professionally, some will. Participants who

are confident that they are just months away from being financially compensated for their participation in big time college sports may have different perceptions of amateurism than their teammates who will not make it to the next level. Third, while this study sought to capture the voices of a variety of revenue-generating athletes, the participation bias was undeniable. Although Black males are the largest demographic in DI college football, the majority (n=26) of the participants were White. Also overrepresented were athletes from affluent, two-parent, college-educated households. Many of the participants perceived themselves to be significantly more academically driven than most of the other guys on their teams. Indicating that they were the minority within their respective programs, the men in this study, on average, maintained a 3.37 GPA. Finally, half of the participants indicated that they were not recruited as scholarship athletes, but were walk-ons that tried out for and acquired a spot on the roster after enrolling. Only one participant was in the process of preparing to take his athletic talents to the professional level.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument for data collection (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 1986). Because “the data are only as good as the qualifications of the inquirer,” Kuh and Andreas (1991) assert, “the integrity of qualitative data depends on the competence of the data collection instruments—human beings” (p. 402). Thus, researchers should not only identify their assumptions, biases, values and attitudes, but also recognize the ways in which they influence their observations, decision-making, value placement, and interpretation of findings.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Findings from individual and group interviews with 40 power five conference (PFC) football players are presented in this chapter. The revenue-generating athletes' shared and lived experiences are disclosed throughout, and in many cases, are supported by verbatim reflections from the participants themselves. The findings provide insight into how this demographic of student-athletes experienced college and the NCAA's amateurism policies. Although the 40 participants are from 28 institutions across the ACC (13), Big 10 (8), Big 12 (5), PAC 12 (11), and SEC (3), various dimensions of their experiences were consistent within and across conferences and campuses. The sample is diverse educationally, socioeconomically, and geographically, the overrepresentation of White men and walk-on athletes from a student population predominately comprised of Black male scholarship athletes is noteworthy. The 40 participants identified as White (26), Black (7), Asian (3), Multiracial (3), and Latino (1). The revenue-generating athletes in this sample often came from affluent families with both parents; were mostly business and engineering majors; and, on average, earned 3.4 GPAs. Half of them (20) were walk-on student athletes. Still, the composite descriptions presented suggest commonalities among those experiencing the phenomenon.

The invariant constituents yielded in data analysis (Moustakas, 1994) led to the identification of three categories that capture the essence of their shared experiences. The thematic categories are: (1) the revenue-generating athlete experience; (2) the costs and benefits of intercollegiate athletic participation; and (3) revenue-generating athletes' responses to NCAA amateurism rhetoric. These findings also provide rich and

meaningful answers to the research questions presented in Chapters One and Three: how do revenue-generating athletes experience college and the amateurism policies governing college sports? What do revenue-generating athletes perceive to be the costs and benefits of participating in intercollegiate athletics? How do revenue-generating athletes juxtapose the NCAA's amateurism rhetoric with their own educational and professional expectations and experiences? Ultimately, what are revenue-generating athletes' appraisals of amateurism policies governing college sports? The presentation and discussion of the categories are followed by a summary at the end of the chapter.

### **The Revenue-Generating Athlete Experience**

The revenue-generating athlete relationship with sport begins long before he reaches college. Starting from their point of entry as well as acknowledging the considerable diversity in their family backgrounds and personal characteristics are critical components of understanding how PFC athletes perceive their athlete and academic experiences. Accordingly, the first prompts on the protocol not only asked them to describe what college was like for a PFC football player, but also how they were introduced to, became involved in, and developed a commitment to sports. In "For the Love of the Game," "I May Have Thought Twice," and "Your Life Revolves Around Football," I move chronologically through their trajectories, paying particular attention to their evolving orientations to school and sport as they transitioned from youth to adolescence and from high school to college and career.

#### **"For the Love of the Game"**

Whether they identified as Black or White, came from affluent or low-income households, grew up in urban cities in the Northeast or rural towns in the Southwest, or

had parents who earned no or multiple college degrees, the revenue-generating athletes' passion for sports originated at a young age when they were introduced to them by family and community members they admired. These significant others, including parents, siblings, cousins, friends, and successful athletes afforded them access and exposure to the sports that they themselves loved, and served as catalysts in the revenue-generating athletes' sport socialization processes. It was from these loved ones the revenue-generating athletes learned to love sports. For some athletes, it was literally seeing those they knew achieve success on the field. One walk-on athlete, who eventually earned a scholarship, explained his brother's influence on his desire to play football:

My brother walked on, earned a scholarship and moved to running back. I obviously looked up to my brother a lot, and I wanted to follow those footsteps. I love football. It's what I always envisioned myself doing. I walked-on and made it, because it was always a *dream* of mine to do so.

Another PFC athlete described how his childhood relationship with a prolific NFL quarterback altered his decision play football:

If you know Aaron Rodgers from the Packers, I grew up with him. When he got to Cali, I was like "Oh, football's kinda cool." And then he got drafted, and I was like, "Dad, can I play football?" Dad said, "Yeah, you can do that." So, I started playing football, and with him making it to the NFL, I thought I could make it to the NFL. Once I got to junior college, I realized I just wanted to go DI and then as far as I could go after that. I think being able to play at the DI level is kind of fulfilling every kid's *dream*.

In some cases, the individuals who introduced revenue-generating athletes to football did not play themselves, but proximity to the game sparked their interest. The sons of coaches, sports medicine doctors and other sport professionals, for example, "grew up on the sidelines" and became enamored with football as they followed their parents to work.

Others came from homes where their male role models were unable to actualize their athletic aspirations and saw their parents' circumstances as inspiration:

It's always been a *dream* that I had. My father is a role model in my life, and he was a great athlete in high school, but being that he was the youngest of 6, he didn't get an opportunity to go to college. He had to stay back and take care of his grandmother who was sick. I'm basically living the dream for him. He's living through me, because I know if he had a chance, he would've definitely taken advantage of the opportunity to play college ball. I'm here now. I've have been successful and it's an awesome feeling.

PFC athletes also came from geographic locations where football is so engrained in the culture they could not credit any particular individual for their love of the game. For as long as they could remember, they had always been fans of the local football programs and dreamt of playing for them since childhood. One participant noted:

I was a Sooners-born, Sooners-bred kid from Oklahoma City. It was always a *dream* to play for the Sooners. Really it was just that passion, that kind of *dream* of getting to play college football for your school, for your team. That was really it for me.

When he spoke of his desire to play football, there was no discussion of personal benefits or gain, just excitement about the opportunity to play the game he grew up loving as well as the opportunity to represent his family and school. This orientation towards sport was consistent across the revenue-generating athletes as children, but as they grew older their motivations for playing football changed.

By the time these young men reached high school, few could ignore their prowess. Continually recognized and defined as athletes by others, they began to develop strong athletic identities, both internally and externally.

All you do is you play high school football, and high school football was ... That was it, man. You're just out there with your buddies, sweating together, working together, grinding on the field together. You knew football in kind of that pure enjoyment form. Why do we play sports? A lot of my research in physical



activities was about why do kids do physical activity? Kids choose a sport because they enjoy it. If I didn't enjoy the camaraderie, and the masculinity of football I wouldn't have done it. I wouldn't have put so much into it. As performance in sports became increasingly a part of who they were, PFC athletes spent less time playing multiple sports and tended to focus on honing their skills in the sports they are best at, not the ones they loved the most. Gradually, sports became not just about enjoyment, but also about competing at the highest level and winning. One revenue-generating athlete explained:

I think that's always been important to me is trying to compete at the best level that you can. For me, competing at the top level that I could was football. If that were badminton, if I could get a Division I scholarship for badminton, I'd play badminton.

Another participant corroborated this claim:

I always played basketball as a kid, that was my favorite sport, but I also started playing football in elementary school. I stopped playing in 6th grade, because I hated it. Then all of a sudden I started playing again in the 7th grade and realized I was starting to become a little bit better at it than everybody else. I started getting a little bit bigger, and by the time I hit high school, I just wanted to play college football. I stopped playing other sports to concentrate on it. I wanted to play on Saturdays on national TV; I wanted to be able to be a student-athlete; and I knew that from early in high school, if you were good enough, it would help pay for college, which is something that I wanted to get.

In both excerpts, PFC athletes' desire for and success in elite competition opened to the doors to a new set of motivations. As children, they loved playing sports because they were fun; as adolescents they loved playing sports because they were good at them; but as standout high school athletes, they loved the financial opportunities winning could afford them, namely athletic scholarships and lucrative professional contracts. In the excerpt below, one revenue-generating athlete described how his motivations for participating in sports changed over the years:

Growing up playing sports, I always wanted to play in college. It wasn't necessarily because of the potential of a scholarship or whatever. It was more just for the love of the game, but then once you get there, it changes. This may be brutally honest, but it's not as much of a *dream* as it once was when you were in high school. It's definitely like more of a job. It's non-stop, year round, and money over hours. I mean...you love it. You wouldn't trade it for anything, but it's definitely not just for the fun anymore. It's definitely got the business component behind it.

In college, regardless of who introduced them to football and why they initially committed to it, the PFC players recognized just how commercialized big-time college sports were. At the DI level, the demands placed on coaches, players, and other athletics personnel were so great that the game is no longer a game, participants felt. At all levels, the lucrative opportunities were coupled with greater expectations and higher levels of professionalism. Even the language participants used began to change. In each of the first four excerpts, all spoke of playing college football as a childhood *dream*. By the time they got acclimated to their athletic schedules, fun and enjoyment were no longer substantial motivations. Rather, when asked why they continued to participate in intercollegiate athletics, the athletes expressed the desire to *help*. Most often, the men from low-income backgrounds had their eyes set on the NFL, endeavoring to get out of their impoverished neighborhoods and *help* sustain their families. On the other hand, the high-achieving revenue-generating athletes from more affluent background were motivated by athletic scholarships and procuring an education for free because they also wanted to *help* their families out. Whether they desired to “buy mama a house” or “alleviate loan debt,” revenue-generating athletes’ motivations became almost exclusively financial in college.

In the following examples, even the revenue-generating athletes primarily motivated by education reveal how much their participation stemmed from monetary considerations. One participant explained that he saw playing DI football as an opportunity to get a free education because college is so expensive. The reason he really wanted to do it was because it was a way for him to help his mom financially. A walk-on, who originally had no intention of playing football in college, woke up one day and realized he could not afford tuition. Realizing he could punt, he spent months practicing his kicking before trying out and eventually earning the starting spot and an athletic scholarship. He explained that he really only played football because it helped him pay for school. Similarly, a revenue-generating athlete from a small town identified football as the only avenue to avoid going to community college or going to work for his dad. He asserted that, he was not going to school to get an education and play football, but he was going to school to play football and get an education. Recognizing that there would be no education if it were not for football, this athlete learned to prioritize athletics over academics, a theme that will be expounded on later.

According to the men in this study, the vast majority of PFC football players came to college thinking they are going to be drafted to the NFL. For a lot of the guys, “That’s always been the dream,” they reported. Their childhood dreams of playing football in college were a necessary part of their escape route. Since they were little kids, they have wanted to get a scholarship, get out of their communities, get drafted, and get paid. One participant recounted the lessons football taught him about so many of his teammates’ lives and their orientations to sport.

When I first started out as a football player in college I was terribly selfish, a real chip on my shoulder kind of guy. I'll tell you, I thought these other guys had it made, and I didn't know about the kind of lives they had lived or the kinds of lies they had been told leading up to college. There are other guys like me, and there are guys who are lower SES and have had a lot of hardships in their lives. These guys support more than just themselves, and everybody is aware of that. If you're going to sell your institution to them, if you're going to try and wine and dine them to come there, then you owe them more. That's just plain and simple because you know deep down that some of these guys aren't going to do anything with your education. We all know it. You know that they're just here because they can't do anything else. They love this sport. It's all they know, and it's all they can do. It's not their fault. It's the fault of somebody way down the line that let the cycle be perpetuated. If you're going to justify putting them in the position they're in—because by all means they are coerced and led to believe that they are destined to go to college and play football—you owe them more.

The passage above highlighted several issues regarding revenue-generating athletes' dispositions towards college football. The most salient was the way in which these men were sold a dream that they are unable to cash in. While the athletes who were not focused on getting to the NFL were investing in other spaces on campus and reaping benefits from that, they also recognized that the system they were effectively using was taking advantage of their most desperate and vulnerable teammates. When they recruit, big-time sport programs present prospective students with a falsified version of the college experience, participants recalled. Athletes from low-income and less educated communities, however, were most likely to believe what they saw during visits. Many of these first-generation college students are seeing campuses for the first time on recruiting trips. Their parents, friends, and others back home were unable to temper their expectations, and the star treatment they received presented a falsified version of what they should have expected when they got to college and what they should have expected to get out of college.

### **“I May Have Thought Twice”**

A thematic undercurrent of the interviews and group interviews with the 40 PFC athletes in this study is the gap between their expectations and realities. Presented in this section are the most common misconceptions: how glamorous big-time football seemed in high school; how physically and mentally tough it became in college; and the politics of playing and practice time, particularly for scholarship and walk-on athletes.

In high school, they watched college football on TV and got a grandiose notion of the “glory” of playing big-time college sports. It seemed as though everyone and everything, from friends and family to media and fans, overemphasized it. As the highest level of intercollegiate athletics, revenue-generating athletes expected it to be hard, but they did not know how much work and time it took to make it on the field. On recruiting trips, coaches showed them an idealized version of the college experience. At first, they were nice. Responsible for getting them to commit, coaches told revenue-generating athletes “the things they know they’ll like,” about the spotlight, opportunity, and celebrity. They made it seem as though they were “the best thing since sliced bread,” and like “everyone had superstar potential.” But, once they were actually on the team, they unearthed the facts that the coaching staff chose to not disclose and encountered a host of realities for which they were not prepared. Some discovered that not only were they not starting, but also there were several guys better than them at their position. After the coaches pretended every single person gets the same treatment, DI athletes got to college and found out they were just “the next piece of meat in line,” often an experience completely unfamiliar to them. The general sentiment became “coaches can change everything.” Over time, the revenue-generating athletes began to recognize recruiting for

what it was. “Recruiting is a trip, man!” one student contended. The world-class coaches and training facilities were more for recruiting the best talent than they were for developing the existing talent. “It’s really all for the recruits,” said some participants. In fact, others warned of not choosing programs based on coaches, because “there’s no loyalty” in college football – even the coaching staff may be different. When they arrived, they recognized that the amount of money at stake in big-time football was the reason that their expectations were not met and that the purity of the sport they loved as kids got corrupted in college. As the level of enjoyment of sport diminished, revenue-generating athletes faced a new set of questions: How much did they love it? How much were they going to invest? How much did they want to suffer for the little bit of pleasure they got out of it? Did the benefits outweigh the costs? Was this right for them? The men in the study reported that despite expecting the business part to be there, they did not expect it to have as much influence as it did over coaching, recruiting, and the overall DI athlete experience.

One of the first observations the revenue-generating athletes made was football was a lot less glamorous in college than it looked on ESPN’s College Game Day. When they got to campus, the PFC players said there were huge discrepancies between how college football was marketed on television and by coaches versus what it was in real life. First, football was only exciting when their teams were winning and they had the support of fans. As one athlete put it, “it’s pretty bad when your opponents have more fans in the stands than you at a home game.” Absent wins, the stadium crowds were empty, the game itself was less fun, and athletes’ celebrity status on campus diminished.

PFC football also became less glamorous when the revenue-generating athletes recognized that it would require a lot more work and hours than they anticipated. As the highest level of sport in college, the participants knew DI football was going to be hard. They expected it to be strenuous and, as elite competitors, believed it should be. As one informed participant put it:

You're basically playing sub-NFL football in the SEC. I knew that if I wasn't fully committed I knew that I didn't deserve to be there. I knew I shouldn't waste my time. I knew going into college that I couldn't afford to major in something too difficult that going to take away from my ability to play football. I needed to choose one or the other.

In the case above, the PFC athlete acknowledged that he knew football would be so difficult that he prepared himself to take on a less challenging course load and devote more time to his sport. Another athlete echoed a similar sentiment, saying that he knew beforehand that time would be tight trying to go to practice, attend classes, complete assignments, and study for exams. Despite knowing it would be strenuous, none realized the extent until they actually lived it. One athlete admitted, that even as the top dog in high school, he anticipated hard work, but he too didn't quite understand how hard he would have to work to get to a level of just being able to play. For him, the glamour was lost when he realized he had to practice all year long. "For the most part, this shit sucks," he said. "The most fun you ever have is Saturdays, which means you have 13 maybe 14 opportunities out of 365 days to have fun. The other days, you're just grinding." The theme of football not really being fun anymore was consistent. In fact, in a different group interview, one participant used similar language to describe his experience:

Man! My first seasons were a grind! My teammates and I did not enjoy it as much as we suffered through it. There were guys that would just quit, and I couldn't blame them. Me, I sucked it up, I kept my head down, and I grinded through it.

The revenue-generating athletes explained over and over again that the transition into sports was incredibly strenuous and tough, both physically and mentally.

When you first get to college and you're first starting out as a freshman, the speed of the game is completely different, the time commitment that you're putting in. You're working the hours of a job a lot of times. That's tough. I knew it was going to be like that to some extent, but there's nothing that you can really do to prepare yourself for the mental part of it. I think the biggest difference that I may have underestimated would probably be the mental aspect of the game, as far as all of the hours that we put in on the mental part of it: watching film, knowing what the other team is going to do before they do it, and just sort of understanding football in general.

While many focused on the physical grind, the participant above discussed severely underestimating how cerebral the game can be. Of note was the consistency with which the revenue-generating athletes were not adequately informed of what they were getting themselves into until they had committed to it. Trying to make sense of why coaches would not better prepare them for the transition into college, one revenue-generating athlete commented, "I don't think it's too sexy to tell a kid that they're going to try to beat him down and get him mentally tougher." Rather, another student added, they prefer to wait until a recruit has committed (as in the case of his older brother) and then say, "Congratulations, you just signed yourself over to 4 years of boot camp." Coaches waited until the cameras were off to tell the revenue-generating athletes about how much blood, sweat, and tears it would really take to put in the necessary amount of work. Still, some aspects of the high-profile sport experience, like the politics behind it, were never discussed.

The revenue-generating athletes reported discontent with what they referred to as the "politics" of college football. In short, politics can be described as anything impacting coaches' allocation of playing and practice time beyond athletic talents. The most



noticeable trend here was the divide between the recruit and walk-on athlete experience and the influence of commercialism on the athlete experience. Exactly half the participants were walk-on revenue-generating athletes. Their overrepresentation in the sample illuminated some unique perspectives and diversity in experience. Walk-ons discussed myriad ways in which they were the least valued pieces in the college football system, and thus received the worst treatment. In PFC football, walk-on players get the least playing time, are hit the hardest, and are not guaranteed to have their tuition, room and board covered, despite being required to put in all the same work their scholarship teammates do, participants stated.

I do completely agree about how much politics there are in football. On our team, you can see it all the time between the scholarship guys and the walk-ons. Though there isn't a divide amongst the players, you can tell that the coaches really do see a difference between scholarship guys and walk-ons. I think that's kind of sad, because me personally I didn't really have plans of playing in the NFL or anything like that, but I really thought that there were some walk-ons who really were quality football players who never got a chance just because they were walk-ons. Politics, I think, are one thing that really hurt college football. It's that line between scholarship guys and athletics really.

Aside from the revenue-generating athlete above, several others stated that coaches most frequently perpetuated the divide between scholarship and walk-on players. One source of the divide was their fundamental belief that walk-ons lack the athletic prowess scholarship athletes possess. One revenue-generating athlete explained that he knew after his first couple practices that as walk-on linebacker, he was going to be tackling dummy for the scholarship linebacker for a solid two years before he made his way up in the rank. Another walk-on described his spot on the team feeling like charity. Calling himself a "make a wish foundation kid," the participant explained that coaches would only

sparsely allow him and other walk-ons to travel or get a play or two in a game to appease them and keep them as extra bodies on the team. He commented:

I think, for me, it was about wanting to get on the field. I wouldn't have joined the team or went out and did the workouts or anything like that if I didn't think I could play...I at least wanted a shot to go out there and show what I can do. Then they could evaluate me and make a decision. But I was a walk-on and they wrote me off from the beginning. I think that was more so why I didn't really enjoy the experience as much as I expected.

Though pushed to their limits in practice, the walk-ons rarely got to display their progress in games. For them, not being fully utilized for what they felt they could have offered the team was the biggest reason they felt there was a gap between their expectations and their realities. The collective sentiment was that they were on the team, but they were not fully a part of the team.

At the core of the discrepancy between expectations and reality are a host of commercial, reputational and competitive implications. The business of football was the reason why big-time football wasn't as glamorous in college as it was in high school, the level of physical and mental strain were as intense as they were, the commitment was so great, and the politics of playing and practice time even existed. Everything, according to them, was oriented towards winning games, building awareness, and generating revenue. The commercialization of college sports has grown exponentially. Though some was anticipated, the PFC athletes did not expect it to have as much influence as it did on coaching the overall revenue-generating athlete experience. "The amount of money that goes into a DI SEC football program corrupts the purity of the sport in my opinion," summarized one PFC athlete. Another added that there was no loyalty in sports anymore between coaches and players, because the NCAA allows coaches to use schools and

athletes as stepping-stones every day. Though he expected it to be that way, it was still more of a business structure than he thought it would be:

I knew that I wasn't going to have friends. I knew I wasn't going to have social time. I knew I wasn't going to be able to go away on weekends, or take time off of anything. I knew I couldn't even afford getting sick. I knew I couldn't afford not sleeping enough. I knew I had to eat all the time. I was expecting it to be difficult, and looking back on it now, five years later, you're like, "Wow." If I had known it was going to be that way, I may have thought twice. We definitely didn't know everything going into it. Expectations did not reach the reality."

### **"Your Life Revolves Around Football"**

Regardless of sport or division, finding the time to balance academic and athletic responsibilities is the greatest challenge contemporary participants in intercollegiate athletics faced. At the DI level, the commercialization and professionalization of sport has exacerbated the amount of time and commitment athletic programs demand from their players, especially in the revenue-generating sports of basketball and football. As PFC football players, the men in this study reported that their commitment to sport impeded their ability to engage in activities beyond football, make academic progress toward degree completion, maintain eligibility, and benefit from college in the same ways their nonathlete peers did. In "Your Life Revolves Around Football," I detail the major obstacles associated with balancing athletics and academics, including enormous time demands, the unenforced 20-hour rule, scheduling conflicts, and "voluntary" football related activity. I begin with a brief explanation of the NCAA's established limits on sport related activity to contextualize the revenue-generating athlete experience.

#### Countable Athletically Related Activity

"To minimize interference with the academic programs of its student-athletes", Article 17 of the *2014-2015 NCAA DI Manual* requires member institutions to "limit its

organized practice activities, the length of its playing seasons and the number of its regular-season contests and/or dates of competition in all sports, as well as the extent of its participation in non collegiate-sponsored athletics activities” (NCAA, 2014, p. 223). Countable athletically related activities or “any required activity with an athletics purpose involving student-athletes and at the direction of, or supervised by, one or more of an institution’s coaching staff” (NCAA, 2014, p. 223), must adhere to the weekly and daily limitations under Bylaws 17.1.7.1 and 17.1.7.2. The former sets the daily and weekly hour limitations for during the playing season, while the latter sets the daily and weekly hour limitations for outside the playing season. During the season, student-athletes may not participate in countable athletically related activities for more than four hours per day and 20 hours per week. Competition counts as three hours. Out of season, student-athletes may not participate in countable athletically related activities for more than four hours per day and eight hours per week. During the academic year, student-athletes shall not engage in any countable athletically related activities one day per week during the playing season and two days per week outside the playing season. These daily and weekly hour limitations do not apply during preseason practice prior to the first day of classes or the first scheduled contest (whichever is earlier) and during an institution’s term-time official vacation period (e.g., Thanksgiving, spring break), as listed in the institution’s official calendar, and during the academic year between terms when classes are not in session and a sport is in season. The chart below outlines which activities do and do not count toward the limit of athletic related activity.

**Table 4. Countable vs. Non-Countable Athletic Related Activities**

COUNTABLE	NONCOUNTABLE
Practice	Compliance, SAAC & SWD meetings
Competition (& associated activities count as 3 hours)	Meetings with a coach initiated by student-athlete as long as no countable activities occur
Field, floor or on-court activity	Study hall, tutoring or academic meetings
Athletic meetings with a coach initiated or required by a coach	Training room/medical treatment/rehab & activities
Setting up offensive or defensive alignments	Travel to/from competition
Required participation in camps/clinics	Recruiting activities (as student host)
Required weight-training & conditioning activities	Voluntary sport-related activities (initiated by SA, no attendance taken, no coach present)
Participation outside of the regular season in individual skill-related instruction with a member of the coaching staff	Fund-raising, community service, promotional or public relations activities including media activities
Discussion or review of game film	Training table, banquets
Visiting the competition site in cross country & golf	Voluntary weight training not conducted by a coach/staff member

### Balancing Athletics and Academics

When asked what college was like as a football player, every participant spoke about the extent to which sport demanded the majority of his time. Most frequently, the revenue-generating athletes spoke of a “balancing act” in which they had to first and foremost, dedicate enough energy to football to even make it on the field, and second, keep up with their academic obligations to, at a minimum, maintain their eligibility. Men in this study explained that putting enough work into athletics and academics to get where they wanted to be dominated their lives. After football and class, there was little to no time to engage in other parts of campus life, like becoming involved in academically purposeful activities, working a job, or simply socializing with their nonsport peers. Because there was barely enough time for even proper sleep and adequate rest, football

players continually spoke about not having enough time to do the types of things that

“regular” and “normal” students do. As one participant explained:

It's a grind. They're two different, mutually exclusive worlds that have grown apart. There's your football life and there's your school life. Professors want the best out of you and coaches want the best out of you, so you're kind of reporting to two masters to make sure you make the best of it. It's hard.

PFC athletes constantly had something to do, whether it was going to film, the weight room, practice, or trying to manage homework and classes. Crunched for time, they were forced to learn how to manage their time and prioritize their commitments, ranking what they were going to get done and what they were not going to get done. One player in the sample asserted:

It's a lot of football and not a lot of school, especially at this level. It's definitely football first and school second. The coaches and people involved in the organization make that known to you. They make it clear either directly or indirectly. They let you know how important football is, and as a player you know that you need to be 100% committed to your sport. If not, it's not worth your time.

Consequently, when they signed their contracts and accepted the responsibility of playing on the most competitive stage of intercollegiate athletics, revenue-generating athletes accepted the fact the football was their number one priority. Whether their aspire to play professionally or not, as men who have procured scholarships based on their football ability, maintaining a spot on the team was critical to actualizing their athletic, academic, and/or career goals. Consider the following passage:

My career goal is to play in the NFL, so obviously I have to take school decently seriously. Otherwise, I won't have a job after I graduate. I think that again it comes down to a function of time. If you look at us compared to other students, we're taking the exact same classes and have to do the same amount of homework, but we have so much less time. We have that five-hour block every afternoon where we could never touch a book. It puts a lot of pressure on you when it rolls around to 11:00PM and you want to go to sleep, but you've got to

finish that paper, and you also know that you have to wake up at 6:15 to make it into your lift by 7:00.

Like the athlete above, men in this study repeatedly juxtaposed their experiences of managing their time to balance both sports and school with their nonathlete peers. After commenting on how much the time restrictions suck, one participant continued on to question the inefficiency of his peers. At the end of his freshman year football season, he could not understand how those who were not dedicating 40 or more hours of their week to football did not submit assignments on time. Further, not only did these other students who “claimed to be so busy” not have to spend 40 plus hours in meetings, workouts, and practice, but also they did not have to then try to battle exhaustion, bodily fatigue, and sleep deprivation to complete their homework. The men in this sample, more often scholastically high-achieving than not, learned through circumstance, how to “crank out” their coursework despite being “too tired to do anything,” something they reported wasn’t characteristic of the majority of their teammates. Finally, in contrast to their nonsport peers, the participants in this study were disgruntled with the ways in which their football schedules heavily influenced which courses they could take, when they could take them, and what they could major in.

The PFC athletes spoke in great detail about the extent to which football monopolized their time, forcing them to adjust all other responsibilities and commitments to their grueling athletic schedules. The men described a “complex” and “lifestyle” in which football “consumed” them. If he had to explain it to someone completely unfamiliar with football, one participant said the best way to put it is, “we basically have something to do all day, everyday, especially during the season.” On a micro scale,

revenue-generating athletes build their whole day around football related activity.

Their sleep, eating, and class schedules must all adhere to their practice, film, and lifting schedules.

My first year, they scheduled our workouts for 6:30 in the morning, so you'd wake up at about 6, go over to the stadium, get a workout in, go to class for 2-3 hours, get some lunch, go to meetings, go to practice, and then go to Study Hall. My typical day was from 6AM to about 9PM at night. The work you didn't get done in Study Hall, you have to go back home and finish. My first year was basically football and sleep.

As another athlete put it, "it goes further than when do I have practice next, what workout do I have to be at, and what time will be doing the things I need to do." He explained that in addition to what and when he chose to do things, he also had to think about how and why he chose to do them. Major considerations included "what is this going to do for my image as a football player and how is it going to affect me being a football player." On a more macro scale, their commitment to football dictated their schedule year round. Even when classes were not in session and their academics did not have to compete with football related activity, family, vacation, and holiday time still did. When other students were out enjoying summer (travelling, interning, etc.), revenue-generating athletes were confined to campus. Their sport commitments are year round, limiting their summers to a week or two and rendering their spring and Christmas breaks as well as other holidays and vacations practically nonexistent. Literally, every decision these men made could be traced to the question: how will this impact my status and eligibility as a DI football player?



### What 20-Hour Rule?

Of the 27 institutions represented in this study, reportedly, only two adhered to the time restrictions prescribed by the NCAA. Both schools were either recently or are currently being investigated for infractions and are being cautious because of the threat of sanctions and increased oversight by the governing body. Absent extenuating circumstances such as these, the other 25 PFC institutions did little to nothing to enforce the 20-hour rule; the Association did little to nothing to hold them accountable for their blatant disregard of the rules. In fact, during one group interview, one PFC athlete commented, “I don’t think there’s a 40-hour rule.” In his experience, the in season time commitment for football so regularly eclipsed the 40-hour mark that he had forgotten that the time restriction was actually 20-hours. Similarly, many participants questioned the existence of any restrictions on football’s time demands at all, critiquing the ways in which this rule was never followed. Participants said they knew it was supposed to exist, but characterized the 20-hour rule was “broken,” “not really paid attention to,” and “a fucking joke,” among other expletives.

The revenue-generating athletes, fed up with their teams consistently “going overboard in terms of hours and stuff” took note of how many hours they were actually dedicating weekly to countable athletic related activities. One student indicated, “A conservative estimate for in season is 45 hours.” Others corroborated this claim as their time calculations typically ranged between 40 and 50 hours per week in season.

I know that the NCAA says it’s twenty hours a week. Maybe you’re literally practicing or working out twenty hours, but that doesn’t include being at the facilities, commuting to practice, team meetings, and those kinds of things. Also, they only count game day as a couple of hours, when the game day is really

almost a whole six- or seven-hour event at home, or all day when you're traveling and staying overnight at a hotel. It adds up to almost 50 hours per week in season.

It is worth mentioning that the revenue-generating athletes recognized and accepted that the rule was almost completely disregarded, because it takes more than 20-hours to compete for championships. As deeply competitive individuals, they expressed their desire to compete at the highest level, but simultaneously requested transparency about what that would require.

#### “Voluntary” Activities

One reason why the amount of hours revenue-generating athletes dedicated to football greatly exceeded time restrictions the NCAA put in place are the “optional,” “voluntary” or “non-mandatory” activities that coaches expected players to organize and participate in without explicitly forcing them to. According to the *NCAA Manual*, for athletically related activity to be considered voluntary, each of the following must be true: student-athletes are not required to report back to a coach; participation is not required—the activity must be initiated and requested solely by the student-athlete; attendance and participation in the activity (or lack thereof) should not be recorded or reported to the coach; and student-athletes cannot be penalized for not participating or rewarded for participating. In practice though, as reported by the revenue-generating athletes, these voluntary practices had a significant impact on the playing opportunities they were afforded.

It's not just a lot of hours. More so it's the obligations that aren't supposed to be mandatory. Like the meetings and the extra schedule of practices without the coaches or the lists coming to get an extra lift and it's like your coaches wants you to go and do these things even though it's not mandatory but if you don't show up to these optional things then it reflects bad upon you and your chances of getting

on the field or having any playing time drastically diminish because they always throw things back in your face like why didn't you come to this or why did you go to that. Even if you say you have homework and stuff like that it's still looked as you still should have made it. If you want to win you should still come and do things like that. Some kids, a lot of kids feel pushed or coerced to do things, do extra things for the team just to get out there and play.

### **Costs and Benefits of Intercollegiate Athletics**

As participants in the most popular, competitive and lucrative conferences in college sports, the greatest challenge the revenue-generating athletes faced was the time constraint placed on them by the more than 40 hours per week (in season) they dedicated to football-related activities. The previous section detailed the myriad responsibilities that are part of a DI athlete's commitment to sport. In exchange for access to the opportunities high profile college sports afford, or the benefits of intercollegiate athletic participation (henceforth referred to as "benefits"), PFC athletes made significant sacrifices, referred to as the costs of intercollegiate athletic participation (henceforth "costs"), to become experts at their craft: football. These costs and benefits fell into six categories: professional, academic, extracurricular, social, physical, and developmental.

For a few, professional benefits included exclusive networking events and job opportunities and national exposure and experiences. These were offset by the professional costs for many, which included not having time for internships and professional experiences, a lack of transferrable career skills and competencies, and the inability to navigate the working world and procure a job. Similarly, the academic benefits of full athletic scholarships and support services were overshadowed by the academic costs that included lower grades, a lack of interaction with professors, and the inability to utilize the available support services. While the participants identified no

extracurricular benefits, the extracurricular costs included not being able to participate in academically purposeful activities like student government, research, study-abroad, Greek life, etc. Social benefits included camaraderie among teammates and being a celebrity on campus, whereas the social costs included not hanging out, partying, and building meaningful relationships with their nonathletic peers, particularly romantic ones. They also did not have the time or resources to travel home and spend time with loved ones. Physically, the benefits of elite facilities and training opportunities were undermined by costs such as sleep deprivation, fatigue, and the risk of both long and short-term physical and mental injuries without guaranteed medical coverage. The few participants who experienced development benefits reported enhanced time management skills, accountability, and teamwork as well as personal growth and maturity. Much more frequently reported were the developmental costs like psychological and mental health related issues, dependence on formalized structures, and relatively rougher transitions out of college than their DII, DIII and nonathlete peers.

Mentioned earlier, and as the verbatim quotes will confirm, the men in this study were scholastically high-performing students with strong academic identities that developed long before college. The majority of the participants were White men from households with two college-educated parents who earned more than \$100,000 combined. The average GPA was 3.4. When they detailed the ways in which they were able to benefit from being on a PFC football team, they made clear that they were the exceptions in their locker rooms. As they began to accept that they might not actualize their dream of playing professionally, these revenue-generating athletes tended to invest their time and energy into “more than just football.” Specifically, the 20 walk-ons in this

study viewed playing football in college as a pathway to their careers rather than a pathway to the league; however, their teammates rarely tempered their athletic aspirations. For the vast majority of PFC athletes, it was “NFL or bust.” Consequently, the participants regrettably admitted that few others were able to take advantage of the available opportunities in the ways that they had. As the participants articulated, the costs of big-time college football can simply be thought of all the things a normal college student can do that revenue-generating athletes cannot. A function of time, PFC football players simply did not get “the full college experience.” By no means were the benefits described in the following pages universal.

### Professional

To compete professionally, the NFL requires players to be 21 years of age or three years removed from high school. As the League has not created an alternative developmental system through which athletes can access elite training facilities, competition, and coaches, high profile college football has become the de facto route to gain national exposure, get drafted, and earn a lucrative contract. In fact, since the league last updated its age restrictions in 1990, every player drafted has attended an institution of higher learning. Whether or not they want an education, going to college is the exclusive pathway to the NFL. The vast majority of the players drafted come from the same premier PFC football programs as the participants in this study.

The revenue-generating athletes reported that the overwhelming majority of their teammates were intent on playing professionally and perceived the opportunity to do so being the biggest benefit of intercollegiate athletic participation. Though few made it to the next level, many regarded the opportunities to train in state of the art facilities and

compete on the national stage as major benefits. One participant in the SEC remarked, “You have access to everything a professional player has. Our facilities are better than professional facilities.” As success on the field garners publicity, bolsters school pride, provides entertainment, and generates billions of dollars in revenue, DI institutions do not hesitate to invest in their athletic resources. Others spoke nostalgically about the experiences of playing against the best competition in front of large national crowds 12 to 15 times a year, travelling around the world, and getting to be “the man” on Saturdays. A couple of participants celebrated their access to world-class healthcare. If they would have suffered an injury during their undergraduate years, they knew the training staff and doctors in a big DI school would have taken care of them, at least while they were in college.

The football network affords revenue-generating athletes’ unique pathways to careers outside of sports. One participant spoke about the power of the network after being recruited for track and transitioning to football:

After running track here and then joining the football team, I’ve noticed a huge difference as far as networking goes. There are more people in the community that gravitate towards the football team. Just walking around the city, you meet a lot of people like, “oh man you’re on the football team.” They want to come up and approach you and talk to you. You create so many different relationships, and you can easily meet somebody who can help you get a job somewhere. I think that’s the biggest positive of playing football was the networking.

The men explained football provided a huge advantage in the job search by opening doors that they would otherwise not have access to. One participant went into the job search nervous about his lack of professional experience and quickly learned that some potential employers viewed his tenure as a revenue-generating athlete as 5 years of professional experience. They were in awe that he was able to be a full-time student,

maintain a competitive GPA, graduate early with 2 undergrad degrees and a master's, and also play football. There seemed to be no shortage of employment opportunities for those who performed well in the classroom and knew the basics about the job application process. As one student explained "a 3.0 GPA as a full-time Division I athlete is going to be valued higher by a lot of people than somebody who has a 3.5 or a 3.6. People understand the extra work that was being put in." Admittedly, both men were strong candidates without football.

Some employers held positive views of certain athletic programs and "ate that shit up" when they saw football on applicants' resumes. They admired particular aspects of football culture and wanted them associated with their organizations and brands. Some, for example, hired athletes because they believed they are good at working with other people and meshing within a team setting.

There are lot of big donors and sponsors who give back to the team all the time. They actually hooked me up with a job after my sophomore year that I ended up using to get into the field that I'm going to get into post-grad. Football has helped my career path. It's helped my entire future.

Based on his professional interactions, another senior noted people have been very willing to help him with his career and getting him a job, not because he did well academically, but primarily because he was an athlete at the University of Michigan. In particular, players on teams with winning cultures, storied histories, and strong support from boosters may receive job opportunities through informal routes without ever formally applying.

State really preaches a family atmosphere. Over 4 or 5 years, you're lucky enough to meet a bunch of people who can help you going forward. A lot of guys graduate and are given jobs by boosters or people that they've met along the way.

Provided these kinds of employment opportunities they may have otherwise not procured, the revenue-generating athletes in this study reported significant professional benefits.

In contrast to the majority of revenue-generating athletes who played college football as a route to the pros, the men in this sample primarily viewed college football as a pathway to a free education that prepared them for a career after sports. Accordingly, they were especially disappointed with the professional sacrifices they had to make because of their commitment to sport. They included not having time for internships, work-study, and professional experiences, a lack of transferrable career skills and competencies, and the inability to navigate the working world and procure a job.

For the PFC athletes I spoke to, not having an internship was a pretty big deal. Stuck training over the summer, they had to forego employment while their peers went off to work. The football players saw these missed opportunities as damaging on multiple levels, because not only did their nonathlete peers have more time to get better grades during the school year, they also had summers with which to gain work experience and tangible skills. Central to their issue with the professional costs was that it would make them less competitive candidates in the future. In one group interview, graduate school athletes noted, “Pretty much every single person that we’ve been competing with for jobs has had tons of work experience from their sophomore year on, while we have no work experience. Nothing.” Similarly, an engineer perceived giving up internships as his biggest cost, because “most of the people in engineering come out of college having had an internship.” Another senior saw not having internships as a drawback, because it was not all athletes that were barred from participating, just football players. “Everybody else



in pretty much every other sport has that opportunity,” he said. Sans these internship opportunities, football players left college with little to no work experience.

Another professional cost was the opportunity to work while in college. The athletes reported that because PFC football is basically a full time job, the hours dedicated to sport made it impossible to make money outside of their scholarships. At best, some men were able to consistently work a couple of hours one day a week, something most employers were not interested in. Further, many programs, whether through formal or informal means, prevented their athletes from taking on any commitments beyond school and sports. Thus, while their stipends provided them with “enough cash to get by,” revenue-generating athletes did not have any ways with which to procure some extra cash for incidentals like transportation, food, etc.

Without summer internships, work-study or other jobs during the academic year, PFC athletes lack professional experiences. The revenue-generating athletes reported feeling “behind the eight ball,” because while athletic experience might help get them in the door, they never acquired any of the technical and tangible workplace skills a lot of their peers had.

### Academic

According to the participants in this study, they gained a lot from being student-athletes, but the biggest benefit of them all was receiving a free college education. Whether a recruit or a walk-on, revenue-generating athletes earned athletic scholarships that covered the costs of their tuition, room, and board. Though they can save students over \$60,000 annually, even “full” athletic scholarships, also known as “free rides” and/or “full rides,” regularly fell short of the cost of attendance, or the comprehensive

costs of attending an institution. Nevertheless, scholarship athletes left school with minimal debt, absent the burden of paying off enormous loans. As one senior explained, an athletic scholarship at a PFC institution was as good as it gets:

You can't get the amount of money and support that a football player gets through any other avenue. A Division I SEC football player gets more benefits as far as food, clothing, money to spend, and privileges than any other student can get through academics or some other scholarship program. I tell a lot of friends who are on somewhat full rides for academics; I tell them their full-ride does not compare to mine.

Beyond content with what was included in his package, this walk-on was also aware, and makes clear to others, that his full ride was not "free," but earned.

What they have to do to maintain their full-ride also does not compare to what I have to do. The cost-benefit is right there. I get the best scholarship that anybody can get, and I put in the most work. I put the most at risk every day, so it's risk and reward like anything else, like the stock markets...you're playing the stock market every day.

The walk-ons expressed a heightened sense of risk, because they were regularly putting more on the line than their bodies. Unlike the recruits, they matriculated into college with no guarantee of the costs being covered, so for them, earning a scholarship was particularly meaningful.

Many of the men in this sample self identified as academically driven; not having to pay for college was their primary motivation for playing DI football. Similarly, they valued the educational opportunities football presented and opted to make the most of them:

Football definitely opened up a bunch of doors for me, in terms of applying for the business school. My athletic status helped me get into business school, and I'm actually in the graduate school now. It helped me in job interviews with different employers, but for other guys I feel like they're so focused on just getting by with school they're not really able to take advantage of some of the opportunities I was able to.

Essential to capitalizing on these academic opportunities, as the respondent above indicated, was not being too preoccupied with football. In one group interview, three players offered their opinions on why, even at the standout academic institution they attended, they were able to access the available opportunities while the majority of their teammates were not:

We were lucky enough to be able to flip the script and take football and use it as a benefit in a different area, which we could all attest to. Not a lot of people have been able to do that, because their whole goal was come in and go pro. Their goal is NFL or bust. A lot of these guys will end up not getting a degree. They won't end up with a lot of things. The cost for them ends up going way through the roof. We all have a lot of costs in what we did, but we got a lot of good benefits out of it also. We're all getting our Master's degrees right now. We've all got undergrad degrees from a top public institution. I double-majored. He (points to his teammate) has a business degree. He (points to his other teammate) has got a degree in economics. We all used football as an avenue, as a benefit in terms of getting an education and getting all the things that we need because, we all saw that football is not always going to be there for us. We used the benefits in a different way.

One such way was actually making use of the extensive academic support services their athletic programs offered. While they reported that most of their teammates underutilized these support services, the revenue-generating athletes who achieved academically shared that meeting with advisors, scheduling tutoring sessions, and setting up appointments with career consultants all contributed their success.

Participants, on occasion, credited some of their academic success to their grueling athletic schedules. One student, for example, disclosed that the time constraints football placed on him forced him to be more disciplined with his coursework. Consistently busy with sport commitments, he couldn't be on the social scene much, even

if he tried. Without the full football schedule, he believes he may have been hanging out and partying all the time.

Before arriving on campus, revenue-generating athletes expected high profile college football to be hard work. Still, it was not until training camp and tryouts that they realized exactly how much of their time football related activity would occupy. As they got acclimated to campus, PFC athletes recognized football was the primary consideration when going through their daily routine, registering for classes, and declaring majors. According to the seniors, everything was related to how much time you're spending in football. "It's all about time." They reported the biggest costs of football are time, sleep, and grades. Trying to catch up in their classes and not fail out, they sacrificed sleep. In most cases, they ended up sacrificing all three. Revenue-generating athletes spent so much time watching film, practicing, and lifting that they had less time for doing homework and studying, taking the "cool" afternoon classes, getting more sleep, and choosing more rigorous majors that would have better prepared them for life and a career after college. Instead, they were encouraged to take classes and choose majors that did not challenge or develop them, so they could dedicate more time to football. One group interview, for example, contained three athletes from universities with strong academic reputations. Even in the institutional contexts least likely to compromise their scholastic standards, the athletes disclosed that they too sacrificed developing relationships with professors and other opportunities that might have helped improve their grades. One of them explained:

We went to Stanford and Notre Dame, two very good institutions. Up until this quarter, I never had a close relationship with any of my professors, never really went to office hours, and my grades suffered immensely. I don't think that it was

because I was slacking by any means. I did what I had to do to get the grades to be able to play. It's not like I have that shitty of a GPA, but it's just not what I think it could be. The grades, relationships with professors, and job opportunities are all costs.

Regardless of which PFC school they played football at, revenue-generating athletes asserted they did not get what their nonathlete peers got academically.

Though DI programs typically provided free academic support services, many athletes, for a number of reasons, were unable to utilize these resources. In some cases, revenue-generating athletes lacked the time to schedule appointments with tutors and advisors and the energy to attend meetings and attentively receive the advice being imparted unto them. In various instances, the disparity in educational background characteristics presented a scenario in which the academic support services available did not benefit the high or low achieving athlete. One participant explained that the free tutoring his athletic department offered wasn't helpful to him after his freshman year, because they were geared at providing assistance to the underperforming students that needed them most. As an engineer, the available tutoring did not cover the material in the high-level mathematics courses he was enrolled in. Sadly, students on the other end of the academic spectrum also faced difficulties as they tried to utilize the support services. Frankly, a large number of PFC athletes enter college so severely unprepared, they cannot benefit from their mandated sessions with support services, because they haven't been properly remediated or brought up to speed in terms of college level course work. It was in these support service spaces that many became aware of the extent to which institutions made ethical compromises to admit standout athletes that fell considerably

short of their academic standards. One high-achieving participant expounded on how his teammate continued to struggle with coursework despite considerable effort:

People are a lot different in terms of how prepared they are for college. One of my buddies I came in with tried really hard in school. He goes as hard as he can. He's a good student, but he just wasn't as prepared for college as I was. For him, the cost is huge. He's going to tutoring sessions and still struggling with classes. I had tutoring sessions, but stopped after my first year. I didn't need them. But guys like him and a bunch of other guys that were struggling in classes put in like 20 plus hours with tutoring and individual study sessions and stuff. The cost is even greater for them in terms of having to keep up. You obviously have to sacrifice your time, but there are a tremendous amount of benefits not everyone can utilize.

### Extracurricular

The time dedicated to playing football came with the opportunity cost of not getting involved in and around campus. Extracurricular costs included not being able to participate in academically purposeful activities like student government, research, study-abroad, Greek life, etc. Though expectedly busy during the season, the football schedule inhibited campus engagement year round because even summers were spent at school training and preparing for the season rather than school or work.

I feel a lot of the guys haven't been able to really experience involvement in the campus and with the school. When I was DI, there was not as much of a time commitment. I was in student government. I was in tons of clubs and still had a job on campus. In DI, they're football oriented all the time. I don't think they're given the opportunity to engage in any non-football related activities.

For any PFC athlete, especially the football players, the biggest challenge was time. After they have done all of the work that is required for sport, the question remained: how much time was left for coursework and extracurricular activities?

Going to concerts, going home in the summer, traveling on the weekends... I'm in Colorado, so going skiing. There are all kinds of events going on, but the meetings and the film study and classes and homework and projects, are a major, major time commitment on your part.

One especially poignant moment occurred when a participant looked me in the eyes and said with a tinge of envy, “You could have a normal college life. I would venture to guess that my college experience was different than yours, Collin.” He continued, “You could travel to other schools, study abroad, go out on weekends, and if you wanted, join a fraternity (all of which I did). I wanted to do a lot of those things, I couldn’t.” The sentiments above echoed a recurring theme prominent among so many: revenue-generating athletes do not really get the college experience that most other students get.

### Social

The revenue-generating athletes also reaped social rewards for their participation in intercollegiate athletics. Whether they opted to play football because of athletic or academic aspirations, the bonds the seniors built with each other were the most frequently cited benefits. Consistently, they reported that the relationships they formed with their teammates were perhaps the greatest benefits of them all. Though they formed quickly, these relationships developed organically, and the men confidently reported that they would last a lifetime. They provided the support they needed to stick with football throughout the 4 or 5 years and established their families away from home. The benefit of “the brotherhood” referred to their particular kind of camaraderie enhanced by sharing meaningful moments and experiences. This recurring theme, when juxtaposed with the quantifiable scholarship or professional contract, was perceived to be “invaluable.” Here are just some of the comments offered by the revenue-generating athletes:

I remember being a freshman coming in. I knew 100 guys, and I knew that they had my back. It’s pretty unique. You have this brotherhood that you’re with for 4 or 5 years. That’s something, along with the alumni network, that you have for the rest of your life.

You have a built in friend group from the day you walk on campus. You have a group that basically becomes like family to you. I know from talking to other people they first get here when they're a freshman or whatever and they struggle to find a home in college. That's not the case for athletes, not most of them at least.

The reason I played for three years after not playing very much is because I didn't want to let the other players on my team down. Those were my best friends in the entire world, and I enjoyed spending every single minute with them. I think one of the biggest benefits of playing football was the network you develop. I thought that was absolutely huge.

You gain lifetime bonds. You also meet a ton of people that are going to help you for the rest of your career, for the rest of your life, and that's really something important and something that you really need to cherish. The experience is invaluable, building relationship, making friends, being a part of a team, and just life lessons in general.

Though not near the extent they did with those within the football network, a few of the revenue-generating athletes reported being able to make meaningful connections with their nonathlete peers.

Despite not having much time to socialize and develop strong interpersonal relationships with their nonsport peers, the long hours the revenue-generating athletes put in on the field earned them the respect of their peers and other football fans. As America watched these ambassadors travel across the country representing their schools on national television, so too did their nonathlete counterparts. Few of the seniors I spoke to were NFL-bound, household names. Nevertheless, they confirmed that being identified as a football player (from something as simple as wearing sporting apparel) elevated their celebrity on campus. When people found out that they were on the football team, the revenue-generating athletes were seen as "cool for some reason." Unsure how or why this happened, participants admitted that they enjoyed the positive assumptions their peers made about them. For the most part, they were famous on campus. "It was kind of nice."



Occasionally, athletic fame transitioned into meaningful relationships, growing revenue-generating athletes' networks and building social and other forms of capital. As one athlete put it, it's about more than just people liking them: "If you get to know them, fans can be "great assets" in terms of who and what you know." As players on PFC conference teams, the revenue-generating athletes got to meet a range of people. "Many of them are connected and willing and able to help you with getting a job in the future."

Reciprocally, some athletes discussed the pleasure it brought them to know that they could be assets for their fans. Impacting people was something they perceived to be a benefit. One athlete spoke about visiting, sending messages to, and playing for fans that were sick in the hospital. "Whatever was going on, you could really lift them up just because they identify with you and the team. That was cool." All things considered, the social benefits can be understood as the ways in which the relationships built through football add value to the lives of the revenue-generating athletes and their fans.

As it pertains to sacrifices, the revenue-generating athletes reported that social lives were one of the costs they incurred when they signed up to play football in college.

You give up a social life. You give up going out on Friday nights. You give up going out at all for the most part, so your social life is out the window. You really can't chase girls, because you've got to focus on football and academics. That's what you have to give up.

Presented with so many popular culture images of college athletes partying, drinking, and appearing to be fully integrated into the campus social culture prior to getting to campus, the participants in this study were stunned by how little time they had to socialize with their nonsport peers. Media depictions, campus visits, and interactions with athletic personnel did not adequately inform them of the rigors of PFC football. For the most part,

they did not really get to have a social life, except during select parts of the offseason.

As one athlete put it:

You're definitely giving up having much of a life outside of football and school. There's not really time for very much else unless you're really willing to really push your limits and wear yourself thin a little bit. The mental and physical grind is significant... Out of 365 days a year, about 330 are football, the nonstop mental and physical parts of it.

Another student detailed his athletic calendar to show exactly how little time there was.

He broke it into three periods: fall, spring, and summer. In the fall, they did not go out at all much because they are playing football. In the spring, they had their weekends to themselves, but still had to wake up early Monday through Friday for 6AM workouts, which means, they were not out very late. During the summers, they had to give up their vacations, because they were in summer school. The older they got, the more they got accustomed to not going home and staying on campus year round. By mid August, they were back in training camp and giving up even more of their social lives.

Repeatedly, the men in the study described how, absent these social interactions, their college experiences were drastically different from "the typical" college experience. They emphasized the frequency with which they were unable to do the things their peers did, like spontaneous trips to nearby campuses and nights out on the town. One of the men recited a brutally honest speech his coach gave him at the beginning of training camp: "It's 3 things: Football life, school life, and a social life. You can't have them all. You can't have a football life and chase women. You can't have a social life. Certain things you have to just give up." The participant appreciated his coach being direct, but reported wishing that this level of honesty came "before he signed his life away."

The revenue-generating athletes also had to sacrifice their family lives to participate in big-time college sports. Mentioned throughout, their demanding athletic schedules minimized the amount of time they had to be engaged on campus as well as back in their home communities. A participant at an institution in the Midwest noted that he went to school 30 minutes from where he grew up, but a lot of his teammates were guys from Texas, California, and Florida. He chose to stay close, because he could not handle the sacrifice of only getting to go home once or twice a year. Another participant was forced to miss his entire honeymoon, as his wedding was the day before training camp started. For him, the cost was not going on a honeymoon, because he had to move into the dorms and report to practice.

### Physical

The PFC athletes reported lack of sleep, constant fatigue, and bodily exhaustion as well as the risk of both long and short-term physical and mental injuries without guaranteed medical coverage as the physical costs of participating in intercollegiate athletes. In the passage below, one participant detailed his thoughts about the physical costs of college football, highlighting many of the ways in which revenue-generating athletes must consider their health:

Your health is always on the line. Anybody will tell you that. You're reminded almost everyday. Your body is your moneymaker, and it's at risk every time you step on the field. Football can vanish in an instant. You can tear your knee up. You can blow something out. You can have nerve damage. All these things can be taken from you right away. It's a scary thought. I thank God I never had any serious injuries. I've never even had to have surgery. Worst thing that happened to me was some nerve damage in my left arm from hitting too much, running into a wedge too much. I definitely have some injuries that are lingering, a lot of tendonitis in my ankles and knees and things. I'm able to deal with it just fine. I know plenty about physical therapy and exercise science that I can take care of myself, and I know my long-term health is probably not going to be affected

physically by the injuries I'd suffered. Mentally is a whole another story; you have no idea. All this concussion research is coming out. I like to call myself somewhat of a health field professional. I have a master's degree in exercise physiology. I never actually suffered a concussion. I can tell you that. I know I haven't based on just what the symptoms really are. I've got probably some minor trauma to my brain that may manifest as some kind of Parkinson's or early onset dementia later in my life. It's scary to think about it. If I'm 55-years-old, and I'm having a hard time remembering my wife's name, I'm going to be like, "Wow. You got me football, you got me." Like I said right now, I couldn't trade those experiences. Maybe I wasn't completely informed of the risks. I know that's a big topic everybody talks about, but I knew that the cost was there. I knew that the cost of my health was on the line every day, and I knew that it was my job to protect myself. I knew that, first and foremost, if I didn't want to get hurt, if I wanted to enjoy my experience, that's up to me.

Revenue-generating athletes' greatest health concern was the possibility of injury. They "regularly sacrificed their bodies" with the amount they put them through. While the player above spoke of minimal bodily damage, others in the sample were not as fortunate.

Participants listed a number of injuries sustained over the course of their tenures as college athletes. One participant had five different surgeries including multiple back surgeries, ankle reconstruction and more. For him, needles have become routine. Another spoke about his football career coming to an abrupt end when he tore his ACL in a game. "As athletes, our bodies are freaking just beat to crap. We really don't even get enough time to rest and heal up." By the nature of his position, an offensive lineman was confident he would continue to have knee, back, and shoulder problems for the rest of his life. One participant's knee was in such bad shape after four years of college football, the doctor said he had the knee of a 100 year-old, and that it had to be replaced. Football literally cost him his knee. Common language used to describe the physical toll that PFC football takes on players' bodies was "always hurt." "Everyone plays hurt. We are never 100% healthy. When you can't play, that's an injury. But most of the time, you're

playing hurt.” Constantly in pain, he and others were left wondering: twenty years down the line, will I think it was worth it?

The unknown trauma done to the brain was another major health concern. Particularly telling was the passage on the previous page, in which a revenue-generating athlete majoring in the health sciences considered himself to be lucky for never actually sustaining a concussion; he only has to worry about Parkinson’s and early on set dementia. Another lineman spoke about football exacerbating his short-term memory loss. “I forget things... I forget why I go into a room sometimes, or I’ll talk to my mom, and I’ll tell her a story that I forgot I told her a day ago.” Beyond physical and mental damage, the revenue-generating athlete body often was sleep-deprived and fatigued. In so many ways, they surrendered their bodies to football because they loved the game.

PFC athletes also wrestled with questions about their long-term health. Though willing to take the risks, what the athletes found disconcerting was after you “give up your whole body playing the sport, and as soon as you get done playing, it’s like they don’t care about you. You’re done.” The medical care and insurance packaged into their scholarships covered them throughout their undergraduate years, but do not offer much in terms of assistance for injuries sustained in football that may linger past graduation. Despite the constant risk of injury, revenues-athletes were in great competition shape during college.

### Developmental

As seniors, the men in this study have persisted through college and reported developing a variety of personal skills including time management, accountability and

teamwork as well as learning values like hard work, dedication, and commitment. As

one participant eloquently stated:

Once you get in, it's tough. But if you make it out the other side, you have a whole new perspective on life. You have a whole new set of tools that will help you further your career. You're going to have good work ethic. The biggest thing is time management. You're going to be able to take criticism well. You're able to conduct yourself through adversity. You're going to be able to make adjustments on the fly. You work well with others. You respect authority figures. You understand that there's a hierarchy and respect it. You learn so much just beside how to play football. You become a better person...

One benefit was learning how to deal with a diverse cadre of teammates and athletic staff from different racial, geographic, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Many of the athletes came from environments that were in one way or another homogeneous. PFC football removed them from their comfort zones, placed them in a variety of unfamiliar college contexts, and challenged them to perform at unprecedented levels. With a common goal bringing them together, the guys are "too busy trying to get that W to waste time on those other things." In fact, they also reported not having time to waste at all. Always held accountable for being on time for football related activity, the guys were forced to learn time management skills. They regularly spoke about doing everything possible to avoid the intense conditioning penalties for arriving to practice late. These on-the-field lessons helped them grow up fast, become men, and learn about themselves in ways they do not believe a traditional classroom could have. A few even said real life seemed "easier" after learning how to balance football and school in college. Unfortunately, most were unable to transfer the skills they learned from football to other aspects of their lives.

Identity-related issues, dependence on formalized structures, and relatively rougher transitions out of college than their nonathlete peers were some of the developmental costs reported by the men in this study. As participants in PFC football, these men were unable to travel, socialize, and do a number of other things that “normal” 18-23 year old men do. The revenue-generating athletes dedicated four or five years of their lives to the routine cycle of football—the cycle was daily, seasonal, and continuous. Every winter, spring, summer and fall was the same. “It’s all just one big continuous cycle.” Once their eligibility was exhausted, they were absent the football routine and forced to find a new one. Thus, their identities were in flux as they struggled to figure out who they were beyond football players:

Once I didn’t make it, and I was no longer able to play football, I kind of hit a wall. I had to discover who I was and what I’m into. I’m still in that process. I think that if I had gone to college, and I hadn’t played a sport, I would. You joined a fraternity; you started teaching on campus; and you just did different things. You developed an identity, several identities. My identity has always been... I’ve always been a football player. Once that’s taken away, it’s kind of like, “Now what?” It’s been irking me for a long time.

The revenue-generating athletes described the end of their commitment to sport as a wake up call. After having all this structure, organization, and stuff given to them in college, the athletes explain that it was tough adapting to a whole new environment where everything was on them. All of a sudden, they were thrown into the real world where things like taxes and health and car insurance became real. “It’s a rude awakening.” Unsure if it was more because of the lack of time or the lack of preparation they received from the classes they took, revenue-generating athletes felt less equipped to transition out of college than other students. Ultimately, their goals were to have jobs lined up after

college, whether in the NFL, corporate America, or elsewhere, and many did not. One group interview participant succinctly captured the essence of this section:

Unless you make it to the NFL, that undergrad degree doesn't really give you much earning potential. A lot of these guys aren't able to do what would benefit them the most if they actually had time, the time to think about, "Hey, what would give me the most future value in terms of a degree?" The big payoff of being in college is making the most of your degree and getting lifelong benefits out of it. Honestly, now that I think about it, that's the real cost of playing college football.

Because being a participant in the most competitive, popular, and lucrative division of intercollegiate athletics did not necessarily translate into steady employment after college, the PFC athletes in this study argued that overall the costs outweighed the benefits.

### **Revenue-Generating Athletes' Responses to NCAA Amateurism Rhetoric**

Article 2 of the *2014-2015 NCAA Manual* (henceforth the *Manual*) lists sixteen Principles for Conduct of Intercollegiate Athletics. The Principle of Amateurism, or Bylaw 2.9, states:

Student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport, and their participation should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental and social benefits to be derived. Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation (henceforth "hobby," as this synonym was used in the interview protocol), and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises. (NCAA, 2014, p. 4)

This section juxtaposes the amateurism rhetoric above with revenue-generating athletes' educational and professional expectations and experiences. Mentioned earlier, rhetoric can broadly be defined as the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing. Below, the amateurism principle rhetoric is broken into four digestible parts, each clause representing an espoused goal:

- 1) Student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport



- 2) Participation should be motivated primarily by education
- 3) Participation in intercollegiate athletics is a hobby
- 4) Student-athletes should be protected from exploitation

In the each of the subsections that follow, I synthesize participants' responses to each of the espoused goals above. Collectively, these syntheses can be referred to as revenue-generating athletes' appraisals of the amateurism policies governing college sports.

### **“Student-Athletes Shall Be Amateurs in Intercollegiate Sport”**

The first independent clause of the NCAA's amateurism principle reads: student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport. Before questioning them about whether or not they identify as amateurs, the participants in this study were first asked to define amateurism in their own words. They offered three main responses. Their first response was, theoretically speaking, amateurism is “to be playing a sport for the love of the game.” In their experience, however, amateurism has simply meant that they, as student-athletes, do not get paid. Finally, some responded a simple “I don't know” or “I'm not sure.” Aware that revenue-generating athletes played football for more than the love of the game, and that to some extent, scholarship athletes are paid via room, tuition, and board, some men in the study were unable to reconcile the inconsistencies between theory and reality. The participant below, for example, struggled to define amateurism during his interview:

I'd probably start with saying it's a made up term by the NCAA. There would be, I guess, a theoretical definition of it, and then an actual realistic definition of it. Theoretical would be playing for the love of the game, like intramural football or something you do on the side. You wouldn't think of money too much with it in a theoretical perspective. From the realistic perspective, we all know it's a huge business. I would say it offers guys the opportunity to go to schools they wouldn't

have otherwise been able to get into and helps them pay for their education. Realistically, it's way more of a business. It's way more... I don't know...

Ideally, amateur sports are about the enjoyment of playing the game instead of the benefits to be derived from them; participation is more for fun than it is for reward. While none of the PFC athletes considered that to be the case within their athletic programs, they provided examples of amateurism such as high school football, AAU basketball, and intramural sports. In high school, they explained, sports were, for the most part, uncontaminated by commercial considerations. Absent these financial concerns, overwhelming time constraints, and myriad restrictions, sports were simpler. Because the game was actually about having fun and enjoying yourself, competing for your neighborhood, school, or merely to compete your competitive appetite was commonplace. Much of that was lost in college.

The revenue-generating athletes explained, "NCAA amateurism isn't real amateurism." In college, the potential myriad academic, professional, and social benefits and opportunities that may result from participating were too substantial to be eclipsed by the enjoyment they get from playing. For starters, many of the participants questioned how they could be amateurs playing for "the love of the game" if the athletic scholarships they received were touted as invaluable forms of compensation for their efforts. The same can be said for a number of other stakeholders in high profile college sport programs. Coaches and athletic directors have become some of the most lucrative and highly sought after jobs in the world. For them, sports are undoubtedly their livelihood, the source of their income. As they approach their jobs with the utmost levels of professionalism, they expect their athletes do to the same. Resultantly, the revenue-generating athletes lift,

practice, watch film, and hone their athletic skills as much as NFL players do.

Acknowledging the only real difference between themselves and professional athletes is their inability to be compensated beyond tuition, room, and board and benefit from their likeness, the vast majority of the revenue-generating athletes conclude that in big-time college sport, the sole purpose of amateurism is to prevent them from being paid. These similarities considered, I found it important to investigate how participants in the study self identify.

### Revenue-Generating Athlete Identities

During the interviews and group interviews, I read off of a list of terms and asked the men in study to rank them in order from the one they identified with most to the one they identified with the least. As a follow-up, they were also asked to elaborate on why they chose to identify the ways they did. Their options included amateur, athlete, employee, student, and student-athlete. Participants were also invited to combine and speak to as many or as few of the terms as they saw fit. The intent here was to afford them the opportunity to express how they viewed themselves based upon their experiences as participants in DI intercollegiate athletics. Most frequently, the participants identified as employees or athletes primarily and as students secondarily; almost no one identified with the term amateur.

**Amateurs.** Amateur was by far the least popular identifier. In fact, of the 40 men in the sample, only one identified as an amateur. He explained that he felt like this because athletes weren't getting compensated the way they should if there were going to be classified as employees. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of participants voiced their disapproval of term, commenting: "I wouldn't say amateur per se," "I don't feel like

an amateur whatsoever,” “you can’t say we’re amateurs,” and “you can’t call it amateurism if everything is professional.” The revenue-generating athletes went as far as to call it a “crock of shit” as well as other more vulgar expletives.

**Students.** Most participants in this sample viewed themselves, at least to some extent, as students. Mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, high achieving students, walk-ons, and students from middle to high socioeconomic backgrounds were overrepresented in this sample. Likely due to response bias, more than half of the participants informed me, during the interviews and group interviews that academically, they were exceptions in their locker rooms. Typically, they invested more time and energy into their coursework than their teammates. For example, half of the sample identified as walk-ons, which means their athletic abilities had minimal to no impact on being admitted to their institutions. Rather, their admission to their college and universities were more akin to those of their nonsport peers. Simply, unlike their teammates who were recruited for football and likely would not have been admitted without their athletic prowess, these men came into college with strong academic identities. Despite these background characteristics, only a couple of the participants primarily identified as students. When asked how they identify, the men responded with a several combinations of hyphenated terms like student-athlete, student-employee, and student-athlete-employee. Seeking to better understand why they ordered the identities in the ways they had, I discovered they put student before the other terms out of habit (i.e. student-athlete) rather than intent. When reminded that the first term should be the one that resonates most with their experiences, the majority of the revenue-generating athletes

reordered the terms, placing employee, athlete, or both in front of student. Here are just a few revenue-generating athletes' rationales for reordering the terms:

I would say I feel like an athlete first, then an employee, and then a student. The student-athlete, the idea of that has gone out the window in today's sports world. Sports take precedence over academics at all times.

I'm definitely not a student-athlete. Maybe they should switch up the priority of it. I'm more of an athletic student. I feel like a football player that goes to school in my extra time. It feels like I'm a full-time athlete and part-time student.

I'd say I'm a student-athlete and an employee. I don't really think we're amateurs anymore, because you've got the best of the best in DI athletics. I feel like amateurs are high school students. I feel like the employee thing makes sense, because you can't miss a practice. It's all mandatory stuff like if you had a job. You're not going to get paid if you don't show up. That kind of resonated with me but then also student-athlete. I'd actually say athlete-student, because athletics takes precedence. It's a big deal.

The two participants that viewed themselves as students first and foremost explained that as walk-ons, their orientation towards college was always going to be academic. They "came in with different goals," had "no serious aspirations to play football professionally," and viewed participation in intercollegiate athletics as a way of offsetting the cost of their education. The other 38 revenue-generating athletes, despite their personal academic backgrounds and the intellectual prestige of the institutions they attended, perceived themselves to be primarily athletes or employees in college. This is particularly interesting considering the breakdown of the sample. Perhaps this finding corroborates what several participants indicated in the interviews and group interviews: to survive on a PFC team, it's absolutely necessary that players fully commit to their sport, whether they experience that commitment as an athlete or employee.

**Athletes.** Of the 40 men in the study, 17 identified primarily as athletes. They offered several reasons for why they felt more like athletes than students, employees, or

amateurs. Before they got to college, were referred to as student-athletes and amateurs by the NCAA, and were subject to intense time demands and restrictions that made them feel like employees, these men prioritized sports and lived their lives accordingly. At their respective universities, their peers and coaches prioritized their athletic identities over their academic identities. One participant explained:

I feel like an athlete, because that's what you're pinned as all the time. You walk into class, and they say, "oh you play football," or you got everyone telling everyone that you play football. I don't feel like an employee because you get told all the time that that's not what you are, and you're going to class everyday, but you don't feel like a student whenever you're out on the field. I would say athlete.

Similarly, coaches, the NCAA, and institutional policy prioritized revenue-generating athletes' athletic schedules over their academic ones. Not only were their academic schedules built around their practice schedules, but also they were held more accountable for athletic performance and attendance than they are academic performance and attending class. Another participant admitted:

I just didn't go to class very often, to be honest. There were definitely times where I wasn't even feeling sick, but I would just not go to class because I had a lot of other stuff going on and it never impacted me. I feel like college, you can miss class and be fine, but football... you're not going to miss practice and be fine.

Because they could have skipped class without penalty, but could not do the same with practice, the revenue-generating athletes' athletic identities were further reinforced.

Finally, a distinguishing characteristic between the participants that viewed themselves as athletes more than as employees was their competitive drive. To be clear, it takes incredible competitive drive to make it to and through a PFC athletic program; however, the men who identified primarily as athletes did so without feeling forced by the university to perform.

I don't feel forced to workout. I workout because I know my competition are working out too, and I don't want them to get the best of me on Saturday nights. That's more about my family and where I'm from. I'm an athlete.

In comparison to the men who felt most like employees, those who feel most like athletes saw their commitment to sport as doing what it took to win, rather than doing what was required of them by their coaches.

**Employees.** More than half of the revenue-generating athletes in this sample (n=21) reported feeling more like employees than amateurs, students, or athletes. According to them, the amount of fanfare, the time commitment, and the competition at this level were professional. Though any athlete can invest time and work towards the 10,000 hours that it takes to be a master of their craft, no other sports demanded this kind of commitment to just survive out there. To make clear the difference between PFC football and non-revenue generating sports, one participant juxtaposed his student-athlete experience with those of his friends that played women's soccer at the same institution. Though they played DI soccer, they were first and foremost students. If they needed to miss practice for class or handle other academic responsibilities, they simply informed their coaches. It was obvious that they were not professional soccer players. "They are definitely amateur athletes. They know that and their coaches know that." In contrast, he described the other players on his team who were much more physically talented than himself. Were anyone to ask them what they did for a living, their answers would have been football. In the PFCs, these men spent more than half of their day playing and focusing on football. "That was all they knew themselves as." If you asked him to identify himself, he too would have described himself as a football player. This participant, an honors walk-on student at his institution, allocated 80% of his time to

sport and 20% of it to his coursework. “By profession, I was a football player in college,” he asserts. “I wasn’t a student. I would hardly describe myself as a student.” Simply put, one reason that the majority of the men in this study primarily identified as employees was because the only other sports that required participants to invest the amount of time that PFC football does are professional ones in which the players are in fact employees.

Compounding this sense of professionalism were the level of exposure, the non-athletic requirements, and the seemingly corporate structure of the college sport system. Beyond on-field training, practice, and competition were all the obligations outside of sport that were not really optional. Regardless of whether or not they wanted to go to dinners and events or do work in the community, they had to in order to make the football team look good and remain in good standing with their coaches. The revenue-generating athletes explained that their responsibilities included much more than developing physically for competition. They were expected to also be brand ambassadors for the team and the university and participate in autograph signings, media days, and other activities typically associated with professional athletes. As one participant explained:

When I played football, I definitely felt like an employee. I was here to help the coaching staff survive, fill the stands, and build our brand. So many things felt like a job instead of playing a sport for enjoyment.

Also in line with playing professionally was the extent to which revenue-generating athletes appeared on television, especially during the season. “Big-time college football is on ESPN everyday, and everyone’s focused on it as much as they are on NFL teams.” Consequently, the work these men needed to put in was commensurate



with that of professional players, but as student-athletes under the NCAA bylaws, they were also full-time students.

Finally, the revenue-generating athletes also described feeling like employees because of how similar the “football system” was to working in a corporate environment.

It would be no different if we were working at some Fortune 500 company, and there are people above us in this system. We are at the bottom. The coaches are our bosses. Then our coaches have their bosses, the athletic directors and staff, etc. Everyone has someone who can fire them. Regardless of what I do, even when I’m in class, that still reflects upon our coaching, our coaching staffs, and our team.

This subsection provided insight into how the men in this study identified. It is important to remember that the purpose was not to deem them wrong or right or more plausible than the other. Rather, it was to investigate the extent to which they, as participants in revenue-generating intercollegiate athletics, perceived themselves as amateurs.

### **“Participation Should Be Motivated Primarily by Education”**

The second clause of the NCAA’s amateurism principle asserts: [student-athletes'] participation should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental and social benefits to be derived. During the interviews and group interviews, I read them the amateurism principle several times. When asked to respond to the parts that they most agreed or disagreed with based upon their experiences, the revenue-generating athletes indicated “motivated primarily by education” was among the most fallacious.

The revenue-generating athletes contend participation in football is not motivated by education. In most cases, it was the opposite: your education is motivated by football. As one participant phrased it, “I’m not going to school to get an education and play football. I’m going to school to play football and get an education.” Further, the guys

expressed, were it not for the opportunity to play football, a lot of their teammates would not have pursued a college education at all. “You cannot make someone motivated by education when they do not value education in anyway. Maybe that’s a problem with society in general, but you can’t blame somebody for not valuing education if they weren’t raised to value it.” Not only did they deem it inappropriate for the NCAA to try to dictate what their motivations should be, but they also believed it would be incredibly difficult, almost futile, to even try to target players’ motivations. The revenue-generating athletes quickly recognized how erroneous the phrase “motivated primarily by education” was. On a regular basis, they witnessed firsthand the academic compromises made to pursue professional and financial gains.

One major reason the revenue-generating athletes refuted the NCAA’s claim participation in intercollegiate athletics is motivated primarily by education is the percentage of PFC players for whom that was not true. According to participants, most of the guys on their teams desired to play professionally. In order to do so, they had to first compete at the collegiate level; it is the only feasible pathway with which to actualize their NFL aspirations. One athlete regrettably admitted:

Less than 25 of the guys on the team take their education as seriously as they should. I don’t say that to knock them, but it’s the truth. Football is their entire world. Even in recruiting, student-athletes get an overinflated sense of self, which leads to them thinking football is everything. If you ask my teammates, probably 98% would say they are going to go to the NFL. That’s obviously not going to happen. It’s unfortunate, because a lot of guys don’t maximize their education and graduate with less valuable degrees.

Though the men in this study believed participation *should* be motivated primarily by academics, they recognized that the opportunity to go professional immediately afterwards changes everything. Academics obviously do not come first when five star

athletes leave for the league after three years and before procuring a degree. Whereas their primary motivation is to play professionally, going to college is merely a developmental stepping-stone to. The men in this study report amateurism rhetoric does not take that into account.

Some of the revenue-generating athletes argue the clause shouldn't even be in there, because although they believe it should, playing football does not have a positive impact on their education. If it were not for football, the men would have more time to dedicate to academics; they would not have to take easier classes or transfer into less rigorous majors. But with football there, being the best on the field took precedence. They want to put more effort into sport than school, and with football's extensive time constraints, the athletes were more focused on maintaining their scholarship and eligibility than getting a quality education. One participant clarifies, "Everything trickles back to so I can play football, not so I can get a great education." Ultimately, many of the men concluded there is no point in the NCAA pretending that academics are the primary motivation if they are not going to hold the athlete in school until he has procured a meaningful degree.

The revenue-generating athletes also contend that there are motivations that go beyond education and the physical, mental, and social benefits.

People are playing for jobs and bonuses. I think it's a part of the story, and we try to act like it's not. It should be educationally driven. I 100% agree with that. It should be, but it's not. Guess what? I can recite a million lines of Shakespeare, and that's not going to make the school multiple billions of dollars. But if I can get ten sacks in a season, put a jersey number in the bookstore, and create more exposure and money for Stanford... It just trickles down. It's all about money. That's why it's not an amateur sport.

The men in the study recognize the institution and coaches are motivated by financial incentives, and critique the amateurism principle for failing to address this part of the narrative.

### **“Student Participation in Intercollegiate Athletics is an Avocation”**

The third clause of the NCAA’s amateurism principle states: student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation. Defining avocation was imperative. Not only did I have to look it up when first examining the amateurism principles, but also all six of the first revenue-generating athletes requested clarification of the term. An avocation is an activity regularly done in one’s leisure time for pleasure or relaxation. It is secondary to one’s actual occupation and not a job or primary form of employment. In a word, it is a hobby. Replacing avocation with its synonym hobby on the protocol seemed an appropriate measure to maximize clarity.

The revenue-generating athletes scoffed at the idea of football being categorized as a hobby. In interview after interview, the participants detailed similar reasons PFC football feels like full-time employment, and nothing like a hobby. The quotation below captured the essence of their sentiments:

I highly disagree with the statement intercollegiate sports are hobbies. Football hasn’t been a hobby since you were in second or third grade. For some of us, this is what we do. In some cases, you call it a job. It could be your livelihood, but it’s anything but a hobby. I hope to use this sport to feed my family some day. It’s like a start-up to my career, and I hope to continue playing long after college. Typically, a hobby is something you enjoy doing for fun in your free time. If you ask most of my teammates, they’ll tell you football monopolizes any leisure time they may have had and that it isn’t fun most of the time. I don’t think, especially at this level, college football is a hobby. I definitely disagree with that.

Though they grew up loving football, playing in DI quickly began to feel like a job because of the 40+ hours they had to put in per week. This was compounded with a long

list of commitments, expectations, restrictions, and pressures associated with representing a PFC institution on national television. At this level, football also creates opportunities for athletic scholarships, national exposure, and getting drafted to the NFL. While football comes with numerous costs and benefits opportunities, their existence inherently contradicts what it means to be a hobby. While they visualized a hobby as an activity more akin to collecting stamps, sewing, or building model planes, they regarded DI football as fundamentally different. When college football is making billion dollars, there's inherently more pressure, so I think their definition is a little contrived. It's not a hobby, but a way of life for the revenue-generating athletes, the cities they live in, and the cultures they are a part of. The professionalization and commercialization of big-time college sport have completely changed the outlook of what exploiting a student-athlete looks like.

### **“Student-Athletes Should Be Protected from Exploitation”**

The final clause of the NCAA's amateurism principle affirms: student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises. Thus, the exploitation of revenue-generating athletes, specifically undergraduate men on revenue-generating NCAA DI men's at institutions in the power five conferences, is the focus of this section. The “multi-faceted intercollegiate sports phenomenon” of exploitation embraces a collection of meanings and “contains fiscal, educational, racial, social, and moral overtones” (Leonard, 1986, pg. 38). Most simply, exploitation can be thought of as an unfair exchange between two parties, in this case, the individual (revenue-generating athlete) and the institution (the NCAA). Though scholars often circumvent the term, as it is typically controversial and difficult to define, it is the

language employed by the Association. To avoid contaminating revenue-generating athletes' perceptions of what exploitation meant, no attempts to explain or clarify the term were made by the interviewer. After leading with the prompt, "In what ways does the NCAA protect student-athletes from exploitation?" only participants understandings of exploitation were taken into account.

Generally speaking, the revenue-generating athletes do not feel the NCAA protects them from exploitation, but that they disguise themselves as proponents of fairness and safety, when they are most guilty of exploitative behavior. In response to the question above, the participants in this study said the following:

It's funny that they're trying to say they're trying to protect us from exploitation. It's like they're protecting us from exploitation, just so they can exploit us exclusively. They're the exploiters, so they're trying to protect against other exploiters coming in and taking money from them. They're really just protecting themselves.

They make us sign a contract that guarantees them a monopoly over every single college athlete in the United States. Rather than allowing us the procure endorsements and make some money off of them, they take it all themselves. It's how they want to do it.

When, at any other time in your life, would you ever sign away your likeness to somebody to use at their own discretion and receive nothing in return? Nobody in their right mind would ever just sign away their likeness for nothing. In my opinion, that is the definition of exploitation.

They have these commercials about athletes graduating and stuff like that, but they're not helping them graduate. They try to use that as good PR, so that they can continue to do what they do right now, exploit all the players.

They need to restructure their own system to protect us from the biggest exploiters of them all, themselves. It's pretty humorous that they're trying to sell themselves as our protectors, when it's really them we need protection from.

The revenue-generating athletes explained they are exploited all the time; there are so many different levels of exploitation; and some forms are more difficult to recognize than

others. The more obvious forms include the long 40+ hour work weeks, the use of their images in NCAA video games, and the selling of replica jersey sales with their numbers on them. “None of us are stupid,” they argue. They know the number 12 in the Stanford bookstore is Andrew Luck, the guys in the video games with the same physical attributes and on the same teams as them are supposed to be them, and regularly surpassing the 20-hour rule by double are all ways in which they are being taken advantage of. They also referenced graduating with less valuable college degrees, a lack of professional experience, and generally being underprepared for life after college relative to their nonsport peers as unfair. Perhaps most frustrating for them was hearing about how lucrative college athletics was for everyone involved but them. For example, the talk about how extending the football is going to bring more money highlighted the imbalance between those who created the revenue and those who profited from it. The college football playoff means more games. While more games means more profit for the rest of the college sport enterprise—coaches, sponsors, broadcast companies, venues, etc.—it also means more work and practice for them, none of which comes with an increase in compensation games. The revenue-generating athletes cynically applauded the Association for being “masterminds” who regularly compound what their employees must produce, but never gives them raises. All of their compensation is lumped into this “free education” that many do not even want.

It’s all a higher, more sophisticated level of exploitation. It’s not an individual tricking you into taking this picture and using it without your permission. It’s more like “hey come here, play this sport, play this game” and we’re going to market this game so that everybody, all these TV stations, all these commercials and all of America strategically exploit you.

“If they really want to protect us,” the revenue-generating athletes assessed, “they’ve failed horribly.”

### **Summary of Findings**

The primary research question in this study was, “how do revenue-generating athletes experience college and the NCAA’s amateurism policies?” The other research questions include: (1) What do revenue-generating athletes perceive to be the costs and benefits of having participated in intercollegiate athletics? (2) How do revenue-generating athletes juxtapose the NCAA’s amateurism rhetoric with their own educational and professional expectations and experiences? (3) What are student-athletes’ appraisals of amateurism policies governing college sports? As reported throughout this chapter, it is important to first acknowledge the variety of educational, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds from which the participants come, as well as the overrepresentation of white men, walk-on athletes, and athletes with strong academic identities. Despite the diversity in their background characteristics, many commonalities exist among the ways in which they experience intercollegiate athletics and the amateurism policies governing college sports.

Important people in their lives, including parents, siblings, friends and other relatives, introduced revenue-generating athletes to sports at a young age. The interpersonal relationships formed with other participants and the success derived from their physical abilities and commitment to sport led to a “love of the game” and the development of athletic identities. Many dreamed of playing sports in high school, college, and professionally. As they grew older and others recognized their athletic prowess and potential, their motivations began to change. Most frequently, revenue-



generating athletes reported that playing football in college became a means to a financial end. While other enticements include competing at the highest level, continuing a family legacy, enhancing fame and celebrity, and the admiration of family and peers, the vast majority saw playing football in college as an opportunity to help their families. The participants in this study—many of who were walk-on, white men from middle class families—had strong academic identities before entering college and viewed an athletic scholarship as a way to get a subsidized education and alleviate the burden of college tuition. According to them, this was not the case for most of their teammates, particularly the scholarship athletes recruited from low-income communities. College, more often than not, was merely a requirement for them achieve their primary goal, playing professionally and earning a salary to support themselves and their families. For them, it was NFL or bust. Were it not for football, many would have forgone college. Either way, few felt prepared for the rigors of being a college student and a high-profile athlete.

Shortly after they arrive on campus, revenue-generating athletes realize the realities of playing big-time college football are much different their childhood dreams. They knew they would have to improve their time management skills to balance their academics and athletic responsibilities, but they had no idea how quickly football would be professionalized. While media and recruiting trips tend to glamourize the value of representing your school on game day, coaches typically wait until training camp to make clear the exactly how much it takes to earn those opportunities. The extent to which politics influence the allocation playing time is not explicitly stated, but understood. As the revenue generated, coaches' job security, and school pride are predicated on winning, players and coaches expectedly prioritize athletic performance over academic success and

engagement in other academically purpose activities. The most pervasive message is sent both overtly and covertly: football comes first and everything comes second. Revenue-generating athletes' lives are built entirely around football, are not permitted to schedule classes during practice hours, and are at all times expected to put forth maximum effort in their athletic endeavors. For those with professional aspirations, there is a rigid 5-year window to display your talents on the national stage. Contrarily, there is no set timeline for conferring a college degree, spending time with your family, preparing for a career after sports, or having a social life. Further, the NFL drafts less than 2% of college athletes, and even fewer procure the lucrative contracts reserved for the best of the best. Accordingly, as college is the final breeding ground before professional play, power five conference football programs demand revenue-generating athletes, regardless of their personal motivations, spend as much time on their craft as possible. Participants estimated that they spent at least 40 hours a week on football related activity—practice, watching film, and competing. These time estimates often exclude study hall, “voluntary” practices, travelling for competition, and resting. Every single athlete reported his athletic program completely disregarded the NCAA’s 20-hour rule, and the NCAA does little to nothing to enforce it. Meanwhile, the association disproportionately focuses its energy on punishing student-athletes for accepting extra benefits. Coupled with expectations of always comporting themselves as ambassadors of their respective programs and universities, the time demand placed on revenue-generating athletes causes them to assert big-time college football is a full-time job for which they are inadequately compensated.

Participation in high-profile college sports affords revenue-generating athletes opportunities that no other students have, but simultaneously prevents them from

engaging in nonathletic activities that comprise the “full” college experience. The perceived benefits include athletic scholarships, elite training facilities, academic and support services as well as opportunities to travel, represent their universities, and showcase their talents on a national level. There are also the intrinsic values derived from football, like time management, discipline, and the ability to work on a team. No benefit was more frequently cited than the camaraderie and brotherhood formed between the revenue-generating athletes and their teammates. Unfortunately, many of these perceived benefits are directly related to perceived costs. Revenue-generating athletes reported that the greatest cost of big-time college sports are the arduous schedules resulting from professionalization and commercialization. As mentioned earlier, athletic scholarships are granted to elite athletes in exchange for the 40+ hours per week spent on football related activity. With the majority of their time dedicated to perfecting their athletic craft, there is minimal opportunity to engage in academically purposeful activities that result in positive college outcomes—interacting with nonathletic peers and faculty, participating in extra curricular activities, studying abroad, and procuring internships and other professional experiences. Not only do their grades suffer, but so do their critical thinking, social, and professional skills. Bound by their highly structured schedules and engulfed in their athletic roles and communities, revenue-generating athletes perceive their experiences to be drastically different and almost completely separate from those of their nonathlete counterparts. Many are not even permitted to enroll in their desired classes or declare certain majors, and as a result, struggle with decision-making after transitioning out of college. Other costs include the risk of injury without comprehensive health insurance and minimal interaction with family. In sum, the athletic prowess that afforded them the

opportunity to attend college doesn't allow them enough time to accrue transferable skills and other real benefits of postsecondary education.

When they juxtaposed their educational and professional expectations and experiences with NCAA amateurism principle, the revenue-generating athletes realized that they agreed with little of the rhetoric. Contrary to the Association's espoused goals, participants in DI intercollegiate athletics identified as employees and athletes primarily and students secondarily; almost none considered themselves an amateur. They also rebutted the claim that participation is motivated primarily by education, highlighting the myriad enticements that incentivize their commitment to sport. Of the four espoused goals, none was as vehemently contested as labeling FBS football a hobby. In their experience, football ceased to be leisurely or relaxing in college. Finally, the men in this study find it humorous that the Association brands itself as the protector of student-athletes, when it's them they need protection from most. The revenue-generating athletes assert the only reason the NCAA protects them from exploitation is so they can exploit them exclusively.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study explored how 40 revenue-generating athletes from 28 colleges and universities experienced college and the amateurism policies governing intercollegiate athletics. It juxtaposed the NCAA's espoused goals with participants' educational and professional expectations and experiences. The sample was comprised of seniors on football teams in each of the power five conferences (PFC)—the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), the Big Ten Conference (B1G), the Big 12 Conference (Big 12), the Pacific-12 Conference (Pac-12), and the Southeastern Conference (SEC). This chapter discusses the similarities and inconsistencies between the participants' experiences and the published literature; provides a set of practical implications for the NCAA, member institution stakeholders (coaches, university leaders, faculty, and athletic and other administrators), and student-athletes and their families; as well as offers recommendations for future research on revenue-generating athletes.

#### **Discussion**

The experiences of student-athletes have been examined by a host of scholars in the 35 years since the NCAA implemented eligibility criteria to address concerns about this population's academic performance. An extensive body of interdisciplinary literature has explored the impact participation in intercollegiate athletics has on the college experience overall, and, more specifically, the extent to which DI student-athletes benefit from college relative to their nonsport, DII and DIII peers. Too often, they are treated like "passive victims of systemic exploitation" in the abundant editorials and exposes and scant scholarly research that fail to enlist their voices and perspectives (Van Rheenen,

2012, pg. 11). The one large-scale survey (Van Rhee, 2011) and the two single-institution qualitative studies (Adler & Adler, 1991; Beamon, 2008) that have circumvented this misstep raise more questions than they answer. While they suggest a majority of revenue athletes do feel exploited, we remain largely unaware of what leads to these perceptions. In this study, 40 interviews with PFC athletes from 28 institutions were used to address that concern directly. Further, the qualitative approach to research adds significant depth and texture to national level discourse that is typically survey-based. The reflexive sense making that occurred during the interviews when participants were asked to juxtapose their lived realities and institutional rhetoric was also novel. Perhaps the most salient example of this was the decision to never introduce inflammatory language like “exploit” but instead to observe the ways in which the delineation of the costs benefits allowed the PFC athletes to organically arrive at their own conclusions.

While slight inconsistencies have been discovered, decades of research support most of the findings reported in chapter four. The NCAA purports competitive athletics programs are supposed to be a vital part of the educational system and that participation in intercollegiate athletics is primarily motivated by education. Participants in the present study reported the opposite. According to them, being a PFC athlete entails balancing two completely separate worlds. Aside from time constraints and fatigue, what revenue-athletes do on the field has little to no affect on how they perform in the classroom. Gaston-Gayles (2004) used the Student Athletes’ Motivation toward Sports and Academics Questionnaire (SAMSAQ) to better understand student-athletes’ academic and athletic motivation. She found academic performance was only influenced by

academic motivation and athletic motivation had no significant impact on classroom performance. This finding is consistent with the revenue-athletes lived experiences. The scholastically high achieving students in the sample attributed their performance in the classroom to the strong academic identities developed in middle and high school. Both Althouse (2007) and Simons et al. (1999) corroborate this claim. Althouse (2007) found student-athletes who were motivationally balanced between academics and athletics typically had college-educated parents and higher GPAs in high school. In this study, most of the participants both came from households with two college educated parents and earned strong grades as high school students and undergraduate. Similarly, Simons et al. (1999) found that the proper transference of dedication, hard work, and focus from the athletic realm to the academic realm can lead to success in both. Whereas female and nonrevenue student-athletes were able to adequately transfer these skills from one domain to the next, the same did not hold true for men on revenue-generating football and men's basketball teams.

The participants in the present study also described having difficulty establishing and maintaining the right balance between academics and athletics, contending the required commitment to and prioritization of sport were most responsible for these tensions. Adler and Adler (1987) spent four years observing how the players on a DI athletic team balanced their various roles and found the overwhelmingly demanding athletic role, the prioritization of athletics over academics, the resulting frustrations and failures in the academic realm, and the lack of positive academic reinforcement conflate to cause conflict between players' various roles (p. 452). Not only were social and academic roles unrecognized, devalued, undermined by their peers, but also their athletic

roles were immensely privileged. Alleviating these internal tensions, the PFC players explained, was most easily accomplished by focusing on their more externally salient athletic identity. Eventually, their athletic or “glorified” self became the dominant master status (Adler & Adler, 1989). As practice, conditioning, games, and travel continued to engulf their time, the revenue-generating athlete themselves privileged their athletic roles and responsibilities above their roles as students, a phenomenon Adler and Adler’s (1991) coined role engulfment theory. Consistent with what the DI basketball players in Adler and Adler’s studies (1987, 1989, 1991), sport became the predominant, and sometimes exclusive, venue for student-athlete engagement for the PFC football players in the present study.

When asked to describe what college was like for a DI football player, each of the 40 revenue-generating athletes I spoke to reported not having enough time to have the real college experience where they could get involved in the types of activities regular student were able to. Potuto and O’Hanlon’s (2006) national study of student-athletes’ perceptions of the impact of athletic participation on academic performance is also consistent with the present study’s findings. While 62% percent of the participants reported viewing themselves more as athletes than as students because of their student-athlete experience, approximately 80% felt athletics was the main reason they were unable to spend more time on academics and pursue more professional and educational opportunities like internships and research. Not only were the men in the present study unable spend as much time as they would like on school and career, they were also implicitly and explicitly told to take easier classes that didn’t conflict with their athletic schedules, lower their expectations for what they could accomplish academically and



professionally, and cluster in majors that were less academically-rigorous and time-consuming. There was literally just enough time in the day to meet athletic requirements and perform well enough academically to remain eligible. Ironically, the very nature of their athletic commitment vastly undermines their ability to fully integrate into the larger campus community and be academically successful.

Since the NCAA implemented eligibility criteria to address concerns about this population's academic performance, the graduation rates of student-athletes have increased significantly. In fact, student-athletes' overall graduation rates are currently higher than their peers who do not play college sports (NCAA, 2010; Zimbalist, 1999). Still, when they disaggregated the data by sport, race, gender, and division, Harper, Williams, & Blackman (2013) revealed longstanding and pervasive inequities in revenue-generating DI programs. Despite the overall increases in graduation rates, athletes in the revenue-generating sports are graduating at lower rates than any other collegiate athletes. Women as well as DII and DIII athletes all graduate at higher rates than the men on DI football and men's basketball teams. These findings are also consistent with what the participants in the present study reported. Again, though they achieved academically, the men with whom I spoke discussed the ways in which they were shocked at the discrepancy between how prepared they had been for the rigors of college level work in comparison to many of their teammates had been. In no way faulting their teammates for their precollege circumstances, the revenue-athletes in this sample more often blamed the system that sold NFL dreams to high school players who they knew had no chance of succeeding academically in the postsecondary environment. In addition, one SEC athlete shared that though all DI student-athletes dedicate a considerable amount of time to their

sport, they all paled in comparison to football and men's basketball. His friends on the women's soccer team, he explained, were permitted to put academics first when necessary. Missing practices, majoring in challenging fields and disciplines, and saying "no" to their coaches was, in some cases, acceptable. For the football players at the same school, this was never the case. Similarly, another student explained that before transferring to play DI football, he was a DI track athlete at an institution where track generated revenue. He attested to the fact that as a track star, he was more than just a student-athlete. He was permitted to participate in student government and other activities that helped him develop holistically; however, after walking on and earning a scholarship to play DI football, engagement in activities outside of academic and athletics seemed impossible. There were simply not enough hours in the day; the athletic demand, spoken or unspoken, was too great.

Bowen and Levin (2003) examined the collegiate experiences of recruited athletes, walk-on athletes, and nonathletes at 33 schools that did not offer athletic scholarships, finding recruited athletes were considerably more likely than their similarly credentialed walk-on and nonathlete peers to be admitted, end up in the bottom third of their class, and perform worse than their high school GPAs and standardized test scores predicted. In this study, though one of the more unanticipated findings, the divide between the experiences of recruited and walk-on athletes was consistent with the existing literature. Primarily accepted to their institutions on academic merit, the walk-on athletes shared the ways in which they differed from the recruited athletes on the teams. Whereas athletic talented influenced the admission of recruited athletes, the same did not hold true for them. They applied to college like traditional students and then earned spots

on their teams. Recruits, on the other hand, earned spots on athletics teams and were then admitted to the institution. It could be argued, to some extent, that walk-ons were more representative of the student-athlete ideal, as their collegiate experience began with academics and then expanded into athletics. In fact, several of the men in this study had procured academic scholarships before earning athletics ones. When they analyzed 40 years of data from 30 highly selective postsecondary institutions with rigid admissions policies, Shulman and Bowen (2001) found even these schools were complicit with the underperformance and lower graduation rates of student-athletes. Consistent with those findings, the participants in the present study discussed how, regardless of institution, the demand placed on PFC football players undermined their universities' academic missions. After they are shown preferential treatment in admissions' processes and recruited academically underprepared, revenue-generating athletes must marginalize their academic responsibilities to handle their athletic ones.

The present study unearthed several findings previously unreported in the literature. For example, the aforementioned nuances of being a walk-on PFC athlete were fascinating. The demand placed on them was the same as that place on the recruited athletes, but their tuition, room, and board were not guaranteed, nor were their meals or playing time. On the field, their lack of athletic prowess—or as they reported, their perceived lack of prowess relative to their recruited teammates—resulted in their bodies being undervalued and sacrificed as tackling dummies. Simultaneously though, this demographic reaped the most academic, professional, and developmental benefits, as they developed strong non-football identities prior to college. They exchanged the greatest physical risk for access to professional and academic resources they were almost

guaranteed to benefit from because they were more prepared to take advantage of them than their teammates. With an average GPA of 3.7, walk-on athletes may provide further insight in maintaining an appropriate balance of athletic and academics roles and responsibilities.

Engaging college students in a process of sense making around the policies that affect them was also a unique aspect of this study. Harper, Williams & Blackman (2013) assert greater transparency is needed to increase accountability in high-profile college sports and ensure equitable outcomes for all participants. What the 40 men in this study shared regarding their appraisals of amateurism rhetoric highlighted the need to include all stakeholders in policy making processes. In fact, not doing so seems irresponsible as it led to feelings of exploitation. Participants in this study expressed displeasure with the NCAA handing down legislation and enforcing extraneous rules they did not really understand. Also unreported in the published research were the ways in which some revenue-generating athletes come to experience secondhand the exploitation of their more prolific teammates. Many of the men in the study learned about the world through the experiences of their peers, recognizing their own privilege (SES and educational). The participants in this study, for example, explained that they were not good enough to be exploited, but watched as the standout athletes struggled to learn anything that was not related to football. The athletes expressed frustration with the big-time sport enterprise taking advantage of the guys who were not academically prepared for college.

### **Conclusions**

Four concluding statements are warranted, given the findings of this study of revenue-generating DI student-athletes.

1. Student-athletes participation in revenue-generating DI athletics is not primarily motivated by education. While this claim may hold true at every other level of intercollegiate athletic competition, the opposite is true at the highest level. Rather, as mentioned throughout Chapter Four, PFC football players are motivated by myriad fiscal, educational, professional, physical, mental, and social benefits. The potential fiscal benefits of participating—earning athletic scholarships, playing professionally, and procuring employment after college—almost completely eclipse the educational components. In many cases, academics are more of an obstacle and means to an end than they are a motivator.
2. For revenue-generating athletes, sports are not avocations, because they are not leisurely or relaxing. Long before college, these men are aware of the myriad benefits that may be derived, and the gravity of their participation only intensifies as undergraduates. Coupled with the 40+ hours they dedicate weekly in season, the bevy of commitments, expectations, restrictions, and pressures make football feel more like a job. Few student-athletes at any level would refer to their sport as a hobby, but the contracts and compensation in big-time college sports exacerbate their professional feel.
3. High-profile college sport is a commercial enterprise. At the DI level, the role of intercollegiate athletics has shifted to generating revenue and providing national entertainment (Overly, 2005). College basketball and football have become almost entirely commercial entities, facilitating the professionalization of college athletics conferences. By the 1990s, competitive college sports “had all the trappings of a major entertainment enterprise” (Knight Commission on

Intercollegiate Athletics, 1999, p. 5) and were “in direct conflict with nearly every value that should matter for higher education” (p. 21).

4. Revenue-generating DI student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by its governing body as well as external professional and commercial enterprises. In all, the men in this study reported feeling exploited when they: were regarded as amateurs not permitted to be compensated beyond athletic scholarships or benefit from their likeness or image; witnessed a bevy of others reap myriad benefits made possible by their efforts on the field; were not equipped to graduate or actualize the lifelong benefits of a quality education at the same rates as their nonsport peers; and are not developed professionally and struggle to transition out of sports into the occupational sector.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study suggest several practical implications for those who are interested in the advancement of revenue-generating athletes on DI football and men's basketball teams and are committed to enhancing their undergraduate experiences and postgraduate outcomes. Recommendations for the NCAA, member institutions, and student-athletes and their families follow.

#### The NCAA

Article 1.3 of the *Manual* is the NCAA's Fundamental Policy. It states, “The competitive athletics programs of member institutions are designed to be a vital part of the educational system.” Further, a basic purpose the Association is to “maintain intercollegiate athletics as an integral part of the educational program and the athlete as an integral part of the student body and, by so doing, retain a clear line of demarcation

between intercollegiate athletics and professional sports” (NCAA, 2014, p.1).

According to the NCAA website, the bedrock principle of amateurism is crucial to “preserving an academic environment in which acquiring a quality education is the first priority” (NCAA, n.d.a). As the governing body—and self-appointed judge, jury, and executioner—of intercollegiate athletics pontificates such lofty rhetoric, the NCAA should regard this period of imminent change as an opportunity to actualize its espoused goals. The following recommendations seek to reimagine the amateur status of college sports, prioritize academics, and treat athletes as students first to better align the values of intercollegiate athletics and institutions of higher education.

**Rewrite amateurism rhetoric.** The NCAA should urgently amend its amateurism principle. At present, the language is tremendously inconsistent with the experiences and outcomes of the participants in big-time college sports. It needs to either refer only to low-profile sports; be modified to encompass the experiences of revenue-generating athletes; or be completely done away with.

**Develop new models.** New models of intercollegiate athletics need to be developed, as high-profiles college sports grow more commercialized and increasingly profitable. One potential model, the “scholarship-banking” model, separates revenue sports from nonrevenue sports to create a Super Division with its own set of regulations (Hawkins, Baker, and Brackebush, 2010). While the nonrevenue sports would proceed with amateurism as is, the Super Division would operate as a minor league, allowing the athletes competing the flexibility to: choose to either pursue their undergraduate degree as a traditional full-time student, take a reduced academic course load during the season, extend the window of time with which to graduate, or have infinite access to their

scholarship. This would afford participants the opportunity to pursue professional aspirations and return to school after they transition out of sports.

Another version of amateurism that could be adopted is similar the Olympic model (Hawkins, Baker, and Brackebush, 2010). The term would refer to the sports that did not generate revenue, while the athletes that played in the most lucrative subdivisions would be considered paraprofessional or “elite” athletes. This model would maintain the current academic expectations of being a full-time student, but allow the athletes on revenue-generating teams to profit beyond tuition, room, and board. High-profile athletes would be able to earn extra income from endorsements, appearances, autograph signings, as receive additional stipends based on their fair market value.

**Modify the CARA 20-hour rule.** The detrimental effects of revenue-generating athletes not having enough time have been a recurring them in this study. To allow them more time to become engaged on campus and benefit from participating in academically purpose activities, the NCAA should modify and actually enforce the 20-Hour Rule.

First, there should be a reallocation of countable vs. non-countable athletic related activity. Any activities where attendance is mandatory, spoke or unspoken, should be designed as countable. These include Compliance, SAAC & SWD meetings; training room, medical treatment, and rehab activities; travel to and from competition; recruitment activities as a student host; training table and banquets; and fund-raising, community service, promotional or public relations activities including media activities.

The NCAA should also set limits, perhaps 10 hours, on the amount of voluntary hours, as dedicating too much time to football related activity, even at one’s own



discretion, could be detrimental to student development. This measure would also make it difficult for coaches and other athletic department officials to manipulate the rules.

Enforcing the new time restrictions and holding member institutions accountable for exceeding them is critical to this type of reform. Instead of allowing high-profile programs to impose more than 40 hours of athletic related activity, in season per week, the NCAA should limit the total hours spent on sport to 30 hours (20 countable and 10 non-countable) and treat the violation of these rules as serious infractions. Though few institutions endeavored to, one university effectively put an oversight officer in place to monitor and report the how closely they adhered them.

The values of the activities should also be revisited. For example, an athletic competition, between warm-ups, game prep, travel, and the competition usually occupies considerably more time than the 3 hours the NCAA says it does, especially for weekend away games where the teams may stay overnight.

**Create 10-hour engagement requirement.** I also recommend that the Association mandate revenue-athletes spend 10-hours a week on academically purposeful activities and structured interactions with faculty, staff and non-sport peers. These activities must be co-constructed so athletes get the opportunity to practice making decisions about what they choose to do with their time. Essentially, revenue-athletes would be afforded 10-hours for development outside of sports.

**Standardize a professional development series.** Without time to participate in internships and work-study, revenue-generating athletes lack professional experience.

The NCAA should standardize a professional development and life skills curriculum that prepares athletes for successful transitions out of sport and into career.

**Greater compensation.** At minimum, tuition room and board should be standard. Students from less affluent backgrounds should be given an additional stipend to makeup for the shortfall between athletic scholarships and the full cost of attending college. Further, rather than living on the most meager budgets, revenue-generating athletes should be allocated budgets that align with the top quartile of students at their respective institutions.

Walk-on revenue-generating athletes who earn a spot on the team should be awarded athletic scholarships. They should also be granted privileges (i.e. eating in the athlete cafeteria and access to support services) that minimize the discrepancy between their experience and that of the scholarship athletes. No students should be competing in high-profile college athletics without some form of tuition subsidies or added benefits.

**Learn from the athletes.** The walk-on experience presents an opportunity to learn firsthand how students in PFC teams can earn high GPAs and procure employment after college, despite the time demands placed on them by their athletic commitment. Simply put, institutions (colleges, universities, and the NCAA) interested in more positive and equitable outcomes for their athletes should enlist the strategies and techniques of their scholastically high-achieving students. Participants in this study also expressed great desire for the NCAA to better explain rules and policies, rather than just enforcing them. Specifically, revenue-generating athletes want a seat at the table during decision-making processes. As a way of privileging their participants' voices, the NCAA should directly incorporate student-athletes' feedback and insight while developing new

and amending old policies. The ways in which I engaged college students in a process of sense making around the policies that affect them indicate that they are more than capable of making valuable contributions. Perhaps most intriguingly, the PFC athletes suggested being able to profit from their likeness would present them with academically purposeful opportunities to learn about and become engaged in entrepreneurship and business, the most popular major in the sample. Surely, the NCAA and its member institutions can recognize the value of standardizing opportunities for experiential learning about the business of sport.

### Member Institutions

Member institutions consist of college and university faculty, leaders, and administrators as well as coaches and athletic administrators.

College and university leaders should be particularly attentive to the ways in which revenue generating student-athletes experience their campuses as well as how they make sense of those experiences. This includes closely monitoring grades, encounters inside and outside of the classroom, course enrollment and major selection trends, participation in academically purposeful activities, and transitions from college to the professional world. Provosts, deans, and department chairs should better prepare faculty for interactions with diverse students groups, including student-athletes generally and PFC students especially. Faculty must be made aware of revenue-generating athletes' confrontations with low expectations and stereotypes in classrooms and elsewhere on campus (Harper et al., 2013).

As the home of sport programs, athletic departments should take the lead in increasing student-athlete engagement and narrowing the gaps in academic and

professional success. Because doing so would require compliance from both coaches and athletes, they should not only be at the center of comprehensive and actionable strategy plans, but also rewarded for achieving greater equity and engagement in similar ways they are for winning athletic contests (Williams, 2015).

Several recommendations (Gaston-Gayles, 2015) for effectively engaging student-athletes in the college experience are outlined below.

**Assess Academic and Athletic Motivation.** Member institution officials should not assume what revenue-generating athletes' motivations are based in sport, gender or race, but assess them, as athletes have struggle balancing academic and athletic tasks most. Understanding their perceptions of their ability to succeed is also important. Gaston-Gayles (2004) SAMSAQ can help identify athletes with low academic motivations and develop a plan to increase it.

**Live on Campus.** Adler and Adler (1991) warn of the detrimental effects of athlete role engulfment: as they primarily live, eat, socialize, and take classes with teammates and other athletes, student-athletes are afforded limited opportunities to engage with non-athletic peers. Member institutions should be encouraged to live on campus with non-athlete peers for the first two years of college, as this measure will increase their opportunity to engage with peers, faculty, and staff.

**Incentivize.** Member intuition stakeholders should not hesitate to use creative tools and idea to achieve desired outcomes. As such, I recommend they use incentives and to motivate behavioral change for athletes and coaches, who can both benefit from incentives that are linked to students' academic performance (Harrison & Boyd, 2007).

**Peer Interaction.** Limited by the time demands associated with their sport, student-athletes need to be able to interact with their peers as integrating into the academic and social systems of the campus culture is significant (Tinto, 1993). As such, university administrators should actively engage student-athletes with their non-athlete peers.

**Increase Faculty Interaction.** Similarly, university administrators should highly encourage interaction with faculty inside and outside the classroom, as it is an important form of engagement for student athletes.

#### Student-Athletes and Families

**Foster academic identities and motivations.** This study makes clear the important role that parents and other loved ones play in the lives of student-athletes, particularly as it pertains to how they are introduced to, become involved in, and develop a commitment to sports. Despite the numerous ways in which coaches, peers, relatives and others in their communities may praise them for their athletic prowess, student-athletes' families must counterbalance this social reinforcement by strategically emphasizing and positively reinforcing academic performance. The literature on student-athletes routinely addresses balancing complex roles and identities as one of their greatest challenges (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Gaston-Gayles, 2009, 2015; Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009a, 2009b; Martin, 2009). Further, academic performance is only significantly influenced by academic motivation. The revenue-athletes in this study, for example, were high achieving scholastic exceptions that developed strong academic identities long before arriving on campus. Regardless of how tired they were or how many hours of practice they had in high school, their parents demanded the same commitment to their

coursework. By the time they got to college, scholastic achievement had become a part of their self-identity and something they were committed to on their own. Many of them credited this to the high academic expectations in their household. Thus, parents of talented athletes should become actively involved in their sons' academic lives, both before and during college. It is imperative that academic success be prioritized over athletic success in the home, because the opposite will almost always be the case outside of the home.

**Prioritize academics over athletics.** The prioritization of academics over athletics should continue as student-athletes and their families navigate the college choice process. Specifically, student-athletes should view going to college as an opportunity to learn rather than to play. Mentioned earlier, the NFL and NBA draft fewer than two percent of college athletes each year (Martin, 2009). The 98% of these students who will not must be adequately prepared to be procure employment elsewhere. Accordingly, it is important student-athletes attend a university that is best suited to develop them holistically, rather than the one that appears to be the most promising pathway to a professional sport career. Because of the deceptive nature of the recruitment process—especially the campus visits as reported by the men in this student—Harper et al. (2013) provide a set of questions that may help student-athletes and their families assess whether or not an institution is the right fit: What is the graduation rate for your team? Besides the few who got drafted, what are recent graduates doing? Will you support my interest in spending a semester abroad and doing a summer internship in my field? What will happen to me if I don't get drafted? How prepared will I be for a career in my field? Can

you provide me specific examples of ways you encourage academic success and the holistic development of your players?

**Make informed decisions.** Based on the reports of the 40 men in this study, I also recommend that student-athletes temper their expectations of what the student-athlete experience will be like. Common misconceptions include how glamorous big-time football seemed in high school relative to how physically and mentally tough and grueling it became in college as well as the allocation of playing and practice time, particularly for scholarship and walk-on athletes. Though they expected football to be tough, it was not until they arrived that the revenue-generating athletes understood exactly how challenging their sport commitments would be and how little time football would leave for everything else. Some participants admitted that had they known then what they know about what it takes to make it on the field, they may have thought twice about playing. To circumvent surprises and mitigate these transitional issues and regrets, student-athletes should not only anticipate coaches overselling their programs, but also seek insight from the older players on the team who can best reveal how demanding being on the team will be. Ideally, student-athletes and their families should be most interested in college and universities where athletic personnel encourage and support players getting involved in aspects of campus life outside of sports.

**Get involved in campus life.** Finally, as early as their freshmen year, student-athletes should have honest conversations with themselves about their particular sets of circumstances, how they came to be on the roster of a revenue-generating athletic team, and most importantly, what they hope to get out of college? Whether it was for a free education or the chance to play in the NFL, the athletes identified helping their families

out financially as the core of their motivations. Again, as the chances of landing a lucrative NFL contract are highly unlikely, I recommend that student-athletes resist the temptation to sacrifice the developmental aspects of college to commit entirely to football and become engaged inside and outside of the classroom. Highly engaged students learn more, earn higher GPAs, and develop a wider array of transferable skills that make them more likely to graduate from college and be competitive candidates for employment and graduate study. Though difficult to do with their myriad time constraints, we strongly encourage revenue-generating athletes strategically take advantage of the clubs, activities, and experiences outside of sports that align with their professional goals.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study was a phenomenological exploration of how undergraduate men on revenue-generating athletic teams experience college and the NCAA's amateurism policies. Seeking to better understand what high-profile players perceived to be the costs and benefits of participating in intercollegiate athletics, I interviewed 40 seniors on 28 football teams across all the power five conferences. Juxtaposing their own educational and professional expectations and experiences with the Association's amateurism rhetoric, the PFC players shared insightful accounts illuminating myriad ways in which the NCAA failed to achieve their espoused goals. Though I answered all the research questions, the background characteristics of the participants from whom I got this rich data did not match those of the men I intended to investigate.

At the FBS level, Black males comprise the majority of the top 25 football teams, all of which are responsible for generating over 50% of their institution's athletic department budgets, many of which exceed \$70 million annually (Hawkins, 2000). Of the



less than 1% of 480,000 college athletes that generate over 90% of the NCAA's annual revenue, Black male basketball players are 60%. These two sports generate enough revenue to provide multimillion-dollar salaries to predominantly White coaches and amateur athletic experiences for 99% of the predominantly White intercollegiate athletes at the FBS level. Simultaneously, these Black men are rewarded with a "free" ride to college, from which they are the least likely demographic to graduate. It was in with this particular racial nuance I intended to examine student-athletes' appraisals of NCAA rhetoric. Instead, the men who opted into the study were academically successful, White, well-off, walk-on athletes who described themselves as the exceptions in their locker rooms. Their high GPAs, impending graduations, and jobs lined up after college, were atypical. Still, despite success in actualizing their own personal goals, these revenue-athletes perceived the exchange between individual and institution to be unfair and exploitative for the majority of their teammates who weren't prepared to navigate the postsecondary environment in the ways that they had. Such a unique demographic of the larger population, their discontent raises suspicions about how other, more vulnerable populations make sense of NCAA policy.

Future research should ask similar questions of larger, more diverse, and representative samples. It is my belief that students with whom I spoke, though compelling, may just be the tip of the iceberg. I am curious to see how big-time college athletes from low-income, minority, and less educated backgrounds made sense of amateurism. Further, the sample contained no athletes that were nationally recognized household names, no men who had failed to persist to senior year, and no men who were a few years removed from their transition out of sports into the occupational sector.

These and other perspectives can have a significant influence on what direction the NCAA goes in regarding amateurism.

### **Closing**

The purpose of the present study was to assess the extent to which revenue-generating athletes perceived the NCAA to be achieving their espoused goals. Overwhelmingly, they reported that amateurism rhetoric was antiquated, erroneous, and exploitative. Were revenue-generating DI student-athletes to rewrite the amateurism principle based upon their shared experiences, it would read something like this:

Athlete-Employee-Students are not amateurs in intercollegiate athletics, and their participation is motivated by myriad fiscal, educational, professional, physical, mental, and social benefits to be derived. Athlete-Employee-Student participation in revenue-generating college athletics is a profession. Because big time college athletics is a commercial enterprise, its participants should be protected from exploitation by its governing body as well as external professional and commercial enterprises.

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